

The Memoirs of Madam Nguyen Hac Dam Thu - Part Two - All the People of the World Are Brothers and Sisters

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Part Two - All the people of the world are brothers and sisters

One: Vientiane refuge

My mother, my aunt and Marion had accompanied me to Orly airport in the afternoon of 7th November 1956. The sky was grey and I was overcome with sadness. On Air France the journey took 36 hours. The flight stopped in Rome, Teheran, Bangkok and finally Saigon; but I got off in Bangkok and took a flight to Vientiane en route for Hanoi.

At Bangkok airport I met three Lao ladies who had been on the same flight as I the previous evening and who were also waiting for a smaller airplane to take us to Vientiane. In Bangkok I felt very disoriented and so I had sat down next to one of these ladies for company. I told her that I spoke not a word of Thai, that I had been all alone at the hotel and had hardly slept. Fortunately, the hotel manager had spoken a little English, which I had used to communicate. I would have to spend an additional three nights in Vientiane while waiting for the flight to Hanoi. So, the lady said to me: "I have just returned from taking my son to Paris to start high school (university). My name is Souvana Oukeo. You are welcome to come and stay with. Since you are alone, you might find it more comfortable than in an hotel." I thanked her effusively for her kindness. Vientiane airport was small, but the chaos was terrible, so I simply followed Madam Oukeo. A car was waiting for her and took us to her house. Madam Oukea lived in a quiet part of Vientiane, in a villa surrounded by gardens, with a kitchen garden at the back. Her husband was deputy minister of transport. He was away in the provinces. There was a maid who looked after their two daughters, the elder

15 and the younger one 10 years old. The driver also looked after the garden, while the cook served as housekeeper. We spoke in French and on the second day Madam Oukeo began to tell me her story.

Her father had been from Saigon. Because his mother had been Lao, he had grown up in Vientiane. Her father had sent her to Hanoi in the late 30s to study as a midwife at the Rene Robin Hospital (now known as Bach Mai Hospital) for three years. After returning to Vientiane, she had worked for some years before marrying a young Lao engineer who had studied in France. She spoke of her midwifery contemporaries, some of whom I knew. From now on we spoke in Vietnamese and became more and more intimate and friendly. I explained my mishap in Bangkok: "When I went to check in for the Vientiane flight, they told me that I did not have the requisite visa to enter Laos. I was appalled. The French Foreign Affairs did not mention that I would need a Laotian visa for transit in Vientiane. I was only transiting Vientiane in order to catch the first flight of the Control Commission of the Geneva Accords in order to return to Hanoi. I'd had to argue and beseech for half an hour before they had permitted me to board the flight to Vientiane."

On the third day Madam Oukeo invited me to visit the *That Luong*, the largest pagoda in Vientiane, by car. I noted the very respectful demeanour of those approaching the pagoda. For example, when they had finished their visit, they left the compound walking backwards, in order to avoid turning their backs to the Buddha. I followed suit. Afterwards we did a tour of the capital and ended the day admiring the setting sun from the banks of the Mekong. I realized that, had I not met Madam Oukeo, I might well have spent the three days in my hotel for fear of getting lost in a strange city where I could read not a single word of the language.

From the experience of these four days, I had learnt an important lesson for life. In order to make new friends, one needs to escape one's comfort zone. When I had left Vietnam, I had only visited countries where the language was known to me. Now, on the way home, I found myself in an Asian country where the written language was not based on the Latin alphabet and I found myself at a loss. My English had atrophied during my three years in France. Above all the issue was complicated by the fact that the government of Ngo Dinh Diem in the South had refused to comply with the Geneva Accords, no negotiations to prepare for a national general election had taken place and the reunification of the country was postponed. As a result, there was only an embassy of the Ngo Dinh Diem government in Bangkok and so I was told to go to this embassy for a visa. The country had become divided into two parts with different institutions and it was not clear when this situation could be resolved. While the Geneva Accords had allowed for a plebiscite of the whole country to prepare for reunification of North and South, in the event this did not take place.

Two: A tireless researcher with love of Nature

For two years I taught chemistry at a technical college of dendrology and forestry.



Chemistry Teacher (from 1959 to 1970)

Chemistry Teacher (from 1959 to 1970) After New Year 1961 I had the opportunity of working in Hanoi for three months with a German specialist from the DDR doing research into the use of organic chemicals to treat forest products.

Karl Bruckner was a lecturer in botany and chemical engineering at the Humboldt University in Berlin. He had joined a group of German specialists in various fields including forestry, forest management, forest products and wood preservation, following a request from the director of the General Department of Forestry and Forest Management of Vietnam. In the beginning we had only one interpreter for the whole group, even though they needed to work separately and cover the whole country. From time to time, we could get some help from the doctoral candidates in chemistry at the University of Hanoi, after they had gained their qualifications in East Germany, but this was difficult to arrange. So, I decided to learn German again.

In the first months of my MPC (Math, Physics and Chemistry) course at the Science Faculty in the University of Paris in late 1953, I had studied German three times a week, just after lunch from November 1953 to the end of April 1954. I had dreamed of visiting Germany and thought that it would be more fun if I knew the language. We were a group of 7 to 10 students and the teacher was German. He had an effective method of teaching and made use practice regularly, even thinking in the language. Instead of taking a midday

nap on a bench at the Sorbonne, after our lunch at the School of Mining, we joined the German class under the auspices of the Sorbonne. The class was great fun and we made spectacular progress in 5 months.

Now, however, I had to learn using a book called *German Made Easy* and a few coursebooks from secondary level German. Fortunately, my husband had been studying in Leipzig (RDA). He sent me a little French-German/German-French dictionary which I was able to carry around with me and learn from anywhere, anytime. I had decided to learn one chapter of *German Made Easy* by heart every day. I tried to practice with Mr. Bruckner, since I used to accompany him when he spent a day at the laboratory or made visits to factories in the provinces; I went with my dictionary to hand. This plan worked as I was never refused a seat in the car, no matter how crowded it might be. I knew that Mr. Bruckner also needed someone to talk to on the long trips outside Hanoi, to Thai Nguyen to visit a paper-making plant or Bai Chay (Quang Ninh) to see a factory making turpentine and rosin from pine sap.

I remember one occasion when we explored Halong Bay on the side with plentiful mangroves in a little rowing boat. I did not worry about my halting German when the rowing took a long time and when Mr. Bruckner tried to explain to me and to Mr. Tao (graduate in the chemistry of forest products from China) about the use of tannin and turpentine in Germany. We talked about the use of mangrove bark which has high tannin content for tanning hides. My German was still mediocre, but with my dictionary I could get by, while an interpreter sent by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs knew nothing of chemistry and forest products. On the way back from Quang Ninh we visited various paint factories in Haiphong, a ship-repair yard etc. Compared with Hanoi, which was an administrative centre, known for its intellectual milieu and for consumption, Haiphong as a port city is more dynamic and has a bustling population, mostly of workers.

Bit by bit my German improved, and I found my internship with Mr. Bruckner more and more interesting and informative. To go on long road trips with Vietnamese only was of little interest, even frivolous, with the men amusing themselves telling popular jokes. By comparison Mr. Bruckner had a fine sense of observation and used the road trips to ask me all kinds of questions.

On one occasion when we visited the Hoang Van Thu paper mill in Thai Nguyen province, we heard complaints about the short supply of pulp. Afterwards we visited the forests of Tuyen Quang on either side of the road in Thai Nguyen. The scenery was very pretty with forests of bamboo; this region had been known as a capital of the resistance against the French in 1948-54. Suddenly, we saw a fire in the bamboo forest. The fire was out of control, but we were told that it was not an accident, but an intentional burn to clear the area for the plantation of manioc. Mr. Bruckner was really upset.

With his hands in the air, he expostulated to the director of the paper mill who was with us: "See the raw material for pulp. Why destroy it to plant manioc? What a terrible waste! The problem is that rice and manioc need to be imported so that the bamboo can be preserved." I thought to myself, what a short-sighted point of view. There is a saying that: "When one is hungry one should walk, even on one's knees." Was there really no means of obtaining the necessary rice in order to protect the bamboo?

On another occasion we visited a sawmill built with the help of Czechoslovakia on the banks of the river Duong, not far from Hanoi. Even as we visited the wood depot and inspected the maintenance of the factory, Mr. Bruckner told us that: "If this happened in the DDR, the director would be fired." In the yard he found a piece of wood covered in fungi. Pointing at the fungi he told the deputy director: "These pieces of timber should be cleaned immediately." The deputy director replied: "Yes, we do the sweeping at the end of each week." Mr. Bruckner frowned and said: "But the spores of the fungi will be carried everywhere by the wind and will be spread over all the timber in your mill. It is question of maintaining the quality of the product, that's all." I thought: "We are dealing with a botanist who knows about all vegetal problems." At the drying kiln, the supervisor told us that once the Czechs had left, they had no further need to use a thermometer to gauge the appropriate level of heat. "We know that just by feeling the wood with our hands," he seemed self-satisfied by his "initiative". I thought to myself how difficult it was to rebuild after the destruction of war and to build an industrialized society with the human resources of a farming population that was poor and ruined after the long years of war. Instead of employing the young and educated, who could assimilate modern methods, as enterprise managers the government had hastily appointed military veterans who had never completed lycée. These people were swiftly promoted supervisor, deputy director and then director without anything more than a political education.

I remember one trip we made to Nghe An and Ha Tinh in the 4th zone in April 1961. The roads were chaotic. Most of the houses in the villages were still straw cabins. We were able to see the daily life of farmers who lived around the native village of Ho Chi Minh at Kim Lien, not far from Vinh, the provincial capital of Nghe An. During our visit to the homestead and museum of the president, Mr. Bruckner was surprised to read his official biography: president Ho Chi Minh's was a life of passionate revolutionary ardour inspired by fervent patriotism. He had been born into a family of poor scholars and brought up by his mother and elder sister who took care of all the family needs. Thus, president Ho Chi Minh understood the abilities and responsibilities of women. In our 1st constitution he had insisted on the equality of the sexes and the emancipation of women, while encouraging Vietnamese women to arise and overcome their inferiority complex. The village was poor, but everyone liked education. During the visit to the

gardens Mr. Bruckner found many interesting plants, saying that it was the first time that he had seen pomelo, orange and lemon trees. In front of the castor tree, he spent a long time examining its leaves, its fruit and its oily seeds. He told me about the purgative and aeronautical values of castor oil. Then he sighed: "In your country castor is seen as a weed that grows on the sides of the road; but be careful as the oil needs to be processed to expel its toxicity." When he saw people cooking with straw, he said: "To us that looks like burned paper or cardboard. We have a cellulose industry that uses paper to make artificial fibre. We know this industry requires huge supplies of raw materials. Not like the artisan methods one sees here."

Later, after lunch at the guesthouse reserved for foreign experts at the People's Committee of Vinh, Mr. Bruckner told me to let the driver and Tao rest while we walked to the municipal market house on foot. Our professional interpreter from Hanoi University, who had returned from studying chemistry in East Germany, took advantage of this journey to visit his family near Vinh and asked if I could stand in for him. I was glad to agree, pleased to have the opportunity to practice German.

"Why the market house?" I asked.

"We will certainly learn many interesting things there." he answered.

So instead of staying in the guesthouse, we wandered through the narrow aisles of the market where the merchandise was laid out on the ground. At the start of the Resistance Vinh had been completely razed to the ground, part of the scorched earth policy aimed at denying the enemy occupation any territory outside Zone 4 (North Central provinces of Vietnam, including Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh provinces, ...). At this time, there were few shoppers and it was convenient for us to have a look. Mr. Bruckner pointed at the limes: "I very much like fresh lime. You must teach me a few words of Vietnamese so that I can order my own meals, otherwise they serve me too much meat and too little fruit and vegetables. I have noticed that in Vietnam you have plenty of fruit and vegetables and that you yourself yesterday hardly ate anything else."

He seemed unhappy to have been unable to share our meals during the excursion. He tried to practice a few words of Vietnamese: "Toi muon an it thit nhieu rau, it thit nhieu rau." (I want to eat less meat, more vegetables).

In truth since 1961 rice and food products had been rationed. My daughter was one and a half, but there was no milk for her. As for sugar we got only 100g per month per her and 500g for me. She loved milk and lemon juice. Foreign experts however were denied nothing and had a special shop in Hanoi.



Dam Thu as a mother with her daughter, 1961.

Dam Thu as a mother with her daughter, 1961.

One of the market traders was chewing betel leaf, mixed with areca nut, *vo* (a kind of pink root that produces tannin) and a little slaked lime. She then spat out a mixture of red orange. When he saw this Mr. Bruckner was astonished. As an organic chemist he immediately wanted to know what the materials were. I explained to him that this custom as well as lacquered teeth had enduring for 3000 years. "I wanted to taste it," Mr. Bruckner insisted, but I would not allow it, saying: "I am not permitted to let you eat anything outside the guest house. It is a strict rule. When we are back in Hanoi, I will get you some from my great aunt." Later, as we rested on a bench at a tea shop, I told him the legend of *Trau Cau* who was said to have founded our betel chewing tradition in the dynasty of the Hung kings, our earliest ancestors.

“Once upon a time there were two twin boys who loved the daughter of their teacher and the elder brother married the little girl. The brothers continued to live under the same roof, but the twin decided, in his sadness and fear that the close resemblance of the two brothers would cause problems, to move away. After one day’s journey he reached a big river that he was unable to cross as it was a deserted place, so he cried bitterly and, out of despair, died and was turned into a kind of stone. His brother, worried about him, set off to find him. He also reached the river and since it was so big, sat down upon that very stone and turned into a very straight tree with a tuft of leaves at the top, in other words an areca palm. The young bride got concerned and also left the house in search of her husband, reached the river and hugged the areca tree, turning into a plant climbing on the trunk of the tree. It was betel.”

The people know this story of familial fidelity and chew the betel leaf which stimulates the saliva, along with the areca nut and the slaked lime (which is derived from limestone). This mixture forms a red juice in the mouth. The bitter taste and the stimulation induced by this mixture encourage communication. *Trau cau* is offered to the guests at feasts and at the engagements and marriages of the farmers as a symbol of fidelity.

“Okay. I refuse to return to East Germany without having first tried betel *an trau*. Please be sure of that.”

In the evening at the guest house, while Tao talked of the establishment of the National Front for the liberation of South Vietnam based on the news he had heard on the radio, Mr. Bruckner told me the dramatic story of his own family.

In the evening, he shared with me this story: “Every time I hear the word war, I get goosebumps. My parents and my two sisters were all killed in the bombing of Dresden, my hometown on the nights of 13th to 15th February 1945. I was spared this fate by the fact that I had been recruited into the army at the age of 17 after finishing high school in 1943. I was a prisoner of war in Bordeaux in 1944. When I returned to Dresden my heart was broken. My whole family was gone, my home obliterated. My beautiful city, with its museums, palaces and universities was blasted out of all recognition.” Now I understood why he had the pure white hair of a 60-year-old at 36. I said to him: “Now both our countries are divided in two, victims of the cold war.” I wondered how he had managed to spend a year in France without learning French, but perhaps the Germans are rather proud of their own civilization?

Upon our return to Hanoi, having collected samples of eucalyptus wood and pine resin in Nghe An, we worked in the newly constructed laboratory of the Institute for Research into Pharmaceutical Products. This was a gift of the East German government and the director was a pharmacy doctor professor who had spent some time working in Germany. Mr. Bruckner had said to

Tao: "I don't need the car to get me from the hotel to my work. I can walk as it is only a short distance from the hotel near the railway station. I can either walk or cycle just like you do. Your country is still quite poor, so why waste petrol on this privilege for us experts?" However, rules are rules. He continued to travel the 800m by car. All he had wanted to do was get a little exercise by going on foot.

From time to time, I went with him to the library. He was unhappy because the large trunk full of laboratory equipment and books that he had sent a month before his departure from Berlin had still not arrived. While he buried himself in books, I read articles in the English review of organic chemistry.

One day we were in the national park at Cuc Phuong in Ninh Binh province where a virgin forest had recently been discovered. Mr. Bruckner was overjoyed by the diversity of trees, plants and shrubs. He had spent the whole day wandering in the forest, examining the division of the leaves of such and such a plant, without bothering about the tiny leeches that attached themselves to his neck or his feet shod only in slippers. The rattan thorns ripped a corner of his shirt, no matter. Our guide had told us that he had never before met someone as fascinated as he himself was by the vegetal life of the virgin forest. He gazed in silence at the thousand-year-old *cho chi* tree. His passion excited the whole group and we did not return to the lodgings until night fall. For myself this was a new discovery, the forest replete with the glories of nature. As a city dweller and sole female in the corps of instructors, thanks to this baptism, I felt able, in the years to come, to take my students on excursions to the forests of Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Phu Tho.

The group of foreign experts from Germany were obliged to prolong their stay in North Vietnam until July 1961 instead of the original May departure date. There were too many problems to deal with. For me it was an opportunity to learn more German. I was glad that at the outset I had decided to work on my German, otherwise I would not have benefitted as much. On the other hand, had I not spoken some German, with whom would Mr. Bruckner have shared his concerns and his ideas? I acted as official interpreter, dictionary in hand, on many trips to visit factories in the provinces.

On one occasion we visited a new combine built in Viet Tri with the assistance of the People's Republic of China. There was an electric generation plant, a factory making sodium-chloride, a plant making paper from the waste of sugarcane and another making sodium glutamate. We were told that this was the first combine of a country on the path to socialism. On the way back to Hanoi, Mr. Bruckner shared his concerns with me:

“What kind of combine is this? How is Vietnam supposed to cope with all the evil consequences of the pollution, especially from the manufacture of sodium-chloride. Furthermore, we were told that chemistry students from school and student engineers could do internships in these mediocre factories. It would be better to forego this kind of nefarious gift of the Great Leap Forward that was at that time taking place in China.”

It seemed to me that he was boiling with unspoken rage. He had come from the most advanced industrial country in Europe, the leader among the countries in Eastern Europe so his point of view was bound to differ from that of the managers in our country. We had only recently attended political indoctrination classes on the 1st 5-year plan and the road to socialism. The leaders firmly maintained two principles in building socialism in North Vietnam. The first was the support of the 11 socialist brother nations, especially the USSR and the PRC; the second was the deep aspiration, devotion and dedication to the cause of reunification by all the people. It was to fulfil this ambition that we should tighten our belts and reconstruct the country. In reality there was huge waste due to our lack of technical knowledge and our naïve approach to industrial projects. I was uncertain about the path set for development. We were told that labour productivity in socialist countries exceeded that in capitalist ones. How could that be true? Having been a country colonized by the French, with French as the language of administration, and only recently developing our own national language, we now had to manage Russian, Chinese and several other languages with different cultural and economic approaches. The problems seemed insurmountable, but we were constantly reassured: “With the victory over colonialism, we are sure of the victory of socialism in the future. Just wait and see.”

On another occasion, another German chemist from the Institute of Industrial Chemistry invited us to take part in an excursion to a village with lots of palm trees, not far from Hanoi. I brought my daughter of 22 months along. Mr. Bruckner called her little poppet. He had no children of his own. He played with her a lot and she liked to be hoisted onto his shoulders to see the world from above. However, when asked whether she would like to go back to East Germany with him and have milk, chocolate etc., she shook her head vigorously and said: “No. I stay with Mummy.”

In early August Mr. Bruckner wrote a long report on his work in Vietnam over the previous 6 months, before his return to East Germany. Tao did not let me see this report, while Mr. Bruckner was amazed that Tao had not set foot in the laboratory throughout the collaboration period. Tao told me that while he had been in China, he had had enough of laboratory work which had affected his chronic sinusitis. He wanted to concentrate on administration. I myself did not take much interest in the analysis of

eucalyptus for making cellulose, but I liked the distillation of pine resin from Nghe An and Quang Ninh for making turpentine and rosin and the quality analysis of these products.

On the last day I attended the meeting between Mr. Bruckner and Mr. Nguyen Tao, senior director of the General Department of Forestry and Forest Products. Mr. Bruckner was full of admiration for the many natural resources Vietnam had to speed its development. He emphasized the planting of pine forests in Nghe An, where the French had already studied the soil and the prospects for forestry plantations. The French had certainly done well since they had envisioned planting pine trees that give a good year-round yield of resin in the Quynh Luu district. Mr. Bruckner had stated that in the pine forests of East Germany or Sweden where the climate is cold, resin can only be harvested 6 months of the year. He pointed out that oil and petroleum were finite resources whereas, if managed wisely, green resources (forests) could last forever.

At the end of the meeting, he smiled kindly and said: "If Nghe An becomes the kingdom of pines, in 25 years' time, with the export of turpentine to East Germany you will be able to import all the machine tools that you need."

I knew that Germany was a country that had a developed pharmaceutical industry and that apart from turpentine all medicines could be produced. From Grenoble, where my sister was in the 4th year of her pharmacy studies, we had in 1955 made a visit to pharmaceutical factories in West Germany and had admired the high quality of pharmaceutical products and the well-equipped and well-organized research laboratories.

Mr. Bruckner had greatly enjoyed his time researching plants in Vietnam. Thus, it was that two years later I came across him again in Vinh, this time in the company of a German PhD who was doing research into jellies derived from algae. On this occasion I was accompanying my students on a study-tour of the state-owned forestry plantations in Nghe An. I was a bit embarrassed to have forgotten my German, but the other expert spoke French and we enjoyed each other's company over lunch. The German expert said: "Yesterday evening we greatly enjoyed a performance of Cheo opera, despite the uncomfortable chairs and the noisy audience." I remembered that during his time in Hanoi, Bruckner had not once been invited to the theatre by Tao. No cultural activities; just work and swimming at the Ba Dinh Club.

A few months later I sent a birthday card to Mr. Bruckner on the occasion of his 37th birthday. I was stupefied to receive a death notice from his widow saying that Mr. Karl Bruckner had died in an airplane crash during a flight from Moscow to Berlin a few weeks earlier. His colleague had returned home after three months in Vietnam, while he, delayed by a month, had met with this fatal accident. He was not only my mentor in scientific research, a field

in which I was a beginner, but he also opened my eyes to the close observation of life and how to draw conclusions therefrom. I tried to apply these lived experiences in my organic chemistry classes, while other subjects remained aspirations beyond of my control.

Three: A friend with excellent Vietnamese

I first met Dr. Ivo Vasiljev during an international conference of women in Prague. I was quite astonished to see this man speak several languages. In the translators cabin he was the one translating Vietnamese, but he also worked on behalf of women from many different countries during the breaks, without himself taking any rest. During the Nazi occupation the Czechs had been forced to learn German, so that Ivo started out with three languages Czech, Russian and German (his father was Russian Czech and his mother was Czech). Then in high school he had learnt French and English. At university he had earned a degree in the culture and history of Korea, while learning Japanese and Classical Chinese at the same time. Since he was interested in oriental civilization, the Institute of Research in the Far East had suggested that he might like to learn Vietnamese with a Vietnamese lecturer who had recently arrived to teach the language at Charles University in Prague. Since he was the sole student, he worked on a doctoral thesis in linguistics. He was fortunate to have worked for two months in 1963 at the Institute of South-East Asian Research in Hanoi, then again for four months from the end of 1964 to March 1965, when the American war of destruction against North Vietnam had begun. I thought that he had dedicated himself to languages which he had put ahead of the social and human sciences while he was still young enough. He was above all interested in the culture, the language and the war situation in Vietnam. He published articles in academic journals and took part in international conferences on the recall of American troops and peace in Vietnam.

Dr. Ivo Vasiljev had many memories of Vietnam. In the 1960s he had had the opportunity to live for a week in the presidential palace when he had been the official interpreter of the Czech delegation led by the prime minister Josef Lenart.

Since the delegation were the guests of President Ho Chi Minh, he had a few exchanges with Uncle Ho in both French and Vietnamese. He remembered the friendly banquet when President Ho Chi Minh entertained the Czech delegation. Since he was seated right next to the president, the latter had said to him in an affectionate tone: "This time you are not an interpreter since you are my guest."

Later on, general Vo Nguyen Giap, Minister of Defence, came to Prague. He had asked for a Czech translator competent in Vietnamese and they had immediately thought of Ivo, bringing him from a boring job in an automobile factory. He had fallen out of favour after the Prague Spring because at an international seminar he had protested against the invasion

of Russian tanks onto Czech territory to overthrow the liberal government, but still they could not find another interpreter as competent as he was. He eventually became the most celebrated interpreter. I had got to know him better when he had accompanied a delegation of Czech women to Vietnam in the spring of 1986. He was delighted to return to Vietnam after unification. He had sent me a greetings card for the New Year of 1986, which he had inscribed with a poem from Ho Chi Minh's Prison Diary in Czech on one side and in Vietnamese on the other. His translation of this book had given him the courage to endure the tedium of his day job.

I cannot remember the poem by heart, but the content is as follows:

If there were no dreary landscapes in Winter

How could we recognize the splendour of Spring?

While thinking of the vicissitudes of life,

Overcoming the travails, the spirit is invigorated.

His translation of the Prison Diary was published in 1985. On the occasion of the book launch in Hanoi he had been interviewed on television and the next day I went with him to *Dong Xuan* market where he was widely recognized. He said to me, smiling: "How quickly the media effect spreads." The sellers were delighted to be visited by this Western man (ông tây) who bought fragrant dried mushroom like a Vietnamese, without any accent. He explained that even in Prague he liked to make Vietnamese food using Vietnamese ingredients. He also told me an amusing story: on his first day in Hanoi Ivo had been strolling around the Hoan Kiem lake when he passed two young girls who said: "Ông tây này béo quá mày nhỉ." (Look how fat that Western man is). Ivo had turned around and said in precise Vietnamese: "Đúng thế cô ạ ...ạ ..." (Yes, that is true, young lady). Shocked, the young woman had dragged her friend off, running.

After the program in the North, we went to the South. Up to this point I had always found that Ivo was very erudite and precise in his translations. He had learnt the Vietnamese of the North and had never heard the southern dialects, so every time he heard a new word, he asked me the exact meaning. He told me how he had once asked for a brochure on the cultivation of pineapple and had been handed one on coconut palms (in the North pineapple is called *dứa*, while in the South it is *thơm* or *khóm*, while coconut palm is *dừa*).

On the way we talked of the problems faced by the large numbers of unskilled Vietnamese who had been sent to Czech in the early 1980s. The inability to adapt to a different culture, without any knowledge of the language, had caused problems. By contrast the Vietnamese students were considered to be assiduous and clever. Sometimes Ivo would get invited to a

courtroom to translate for a Vietnamese worker who had got into some trouble. This gave him the opportunity to act as a bridge between the young workers and the Czech authorities. He had written a few articles in the newspapers, designed to highlight the cultural differences that might lead to misunderstandings and regrettable incidents. For example, Vietnamese like to laugh at almost anything, which seems normal to them, but might strike a Czech as ironic and vexatious.

Ivo thought nothing of visiting the shared lodgings of the Vietnamese; he attended weddings as if a close family member or a kind-hearted big brother. He also befriended many young Vietnamese workers who shared their thoughts with him when they felt grieved by something. After telling me some sad stories he apologized for having upset me. I thanked him for his generosity and empathy with the situation of the young expatriates.

I was glad to catch up with Ivo again by email when he was awarded the 2010 Phan Chu Trinh cultural award. It was then that I learned that he had become a valued doctor professor in Vietnamese philology, known for his cultural and linguistic studies. During his visits to Vietnam in partnership with the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities he had spent two years in succession in the central region, taking part in the exploration of the site of a sunken cargo ship not far from Cu Lao Cham (Da Nang). In 2005 Ivo received the Order of Friendship from the hands of President Tran Duc Luong. With his broad vision he had taken part in the teaching of Vietnamese in Czech, all the time encouraging the Vietnamese community – a minority in Czech – to teach their own children Vietnamese from childhood, which would serve them well in later life. He had cooperated with Nguyen Quyet Tien in the publication of the big Czech-Vietnamese dictionary in six volumes, the third volume of which appeared in 2015.

At the age of 76 Ivo Vasiljev had made his 50th visit to Vietnam in order to take part in the conference on the Buddhist king Tran Nhan Tong in Hanoi. Travelling with young people he had visited the mountains of Yen Tu with their precipitous cliffs and home to the Ngoa Van temple where Tran Nhan Tong meditated up until his death. I did not have the opportunity to see Ivo again, but I was not surprised to learn of his achievements in the field of the humanities. Ivo Vasiljev was not only a great scholar, but also a man replete with understanding of both eastern and western culture, who had the heart of a Buddha.

I wrote this section as a tribute to commemorate Mr. Vasiljev who passed away in 2015 at aged 81.

Four: A passionate explorer of the Far East

My first encounter with William Hanbury-Tenison took place at the Temple of Literature (Van Mieu – Quoc Tu Giam) in the Spring of 1991, when I was visiting the deputy director of the centre for research into the culture of the

Quoc Tu Giam to obtain a copy of the dissertation on the 1st stele at the Temple of Literature which bears the name of my paternal ancestor who won the 2nd highest position in the civil service examinations of 1442. I was killing time in the souvenir shop. By chance I spoke a word of English at the request of the saleswoman of whom William had asked some question in relation to a lacquer painting. William took advantage of the opportunity to make my acquaintance. It was my first encounter with an Englishman.

He had an oval face and was tall and trim. Since he spoke fluent French, I suggested that we might better communicate in French. He gave me his business card which indicated that he was the representative of the commercial enterprise Jardine Matheson of Hong Kong which had a branch in Ho Chi Minh City. He had been in Vietnam for several months only and was now in Hanoi to find a Vietnamese representative. He told me that he had not much experience of business in Vietnam and had chosen to set up in Ho Chi Minh City, not realizing that all the decisions were made in Hanoi. He asked me whether I might introduce a man of about 40 with experience of dealing with the central government departments in Hanoi. I

remembered that when we had studied English in the 6th year, we had been told that the English were phlegmatic as the saying went “Phlegmatic like an Englishman”. Perhaps that was the French perspective. I found him easy going and we engaged in conversation without ceremony.

“Where did you learn French? You speak it without an accent.” William asked me, astonished. He knew that North Vietnam had been closed to westerners during the years of the Cold War and the war against the Americans. Thus, it was unusual to find someone relatively young who spoke a western European language fluently.

“I learnt the language during the colonial period, from kindergarten on. I am now already retired.”

“Yet you still speak the language?”

“I spent two years studying at the faculty of sciences in Paris and returned to Hanoi in 1956.”

“You are an idealist. At the moment, Western Europe is fully occupied with the problems in eastern Europe. Coming, as I do, from Hong Kong, I am one of the pioneers in exploring the opportunities for investment in Vietnam.

I have never had a business card, so he asked me for my name and address. After this encounter I introduced him on the telephone to a candidate of about 30 years of age. I was quite surprised when he came to visit me a few days later. I was still living in the same house that had been my home since

childhood, but it had been divided into several rooms inhabited by various families who had come from the Resistance zone in 1954. Our little dining room was located in the courtyard behind my grandmother's villa.

We had never received strangers at home. William had found us thanks to a neighbour who lived opposite and knew a little English. Here was a young man fallen from the sky! He gave me a package of green tea to thank me for the introduction, but the young man in question was too young for the position in Hanoi. He thought that he himself was already too young, being only 29 years old. Having done a degree in Art History at Cambridge, he was now trying to make a career in Asia. He told me some of his adventures: "I am keeping the arts for later and must first make a living. Thanks to some friends of my diplomat father I was able to do an internship in Taiwan, learning about commerce and finance, before joining the same firm in Hong Kong."

"Following the various European postings of my father's diplomatic career I was able to learn French in Belgium and German in West Germany ...then after university I studied Chinese in Taiwan and Japanese in Japan, while learning about the art history of those countries at the same time. I went to China the first time in 1983. I was driven by curiosity to travel in search of understanding of new ways of thinking in a huge country in the midst of profound change."

"I travelled around China mostly by train." He told me. "I learnt about the life of people in different regions, I observed the ways of doing business at each station. In the big cities one sees much reconstruction and prosperity, but in the countryside most people are still poor. Going by airplane is simply a means of transport, whereas by train one can learn a lot of things. In fact, over the last few years, I have travelled all over China, except for those parts that are closed to foreigners."

"How did you manage when there were no trains and no roads?"

"In some cases, I even found the opportunity to ride horses."

"Where did you learn to ride a horse?"

"I learn to ride on a pony in primary school. Then when I was 17, during my gap year, my father sent me to Australia to work as a jackeroo on a sheep station. I was in effect living the life of a cowboy, riding around the bush with a whip in my hand. It was exciting."

"I have heard that the English like sport a lot. I have read in the newspapers that the son of Princess Diana, Prince William, learnt to play rugby in primary school; he had an accident and had to go to hospital. I think that team sports encourage determination, team spirit and discipline."

Furthermore, one can see that sportsmen have good posture. It is a shame that the students here do not like to do gymnastics. Apart from football they only do a little volleyball and basketball.”

We moved freely from one subject to another. From sport we moved to literature. In talking of the novel *Gone with The Wind* by Margaret Mitchell we discussed the strong character of Scarlett O’Hara and that her father had been an immigrant from Ireland to the United States. William said that the Irish are very tenacious and hard-working. His grandparents were Irish, but his father had taken British citizenship. He mentioned various American presidents with Irish ancestry. I said that in reading the memoirs of President Nixon I had learnt of his Irish origins.

William told me about the foreign investment conference that had brought together several dozen people the previous November in Hanoi.

“Was that the first time you took part in an investment conference? What did you think of it?”

“I found out that the Vietnamese have both an inferiority complex and a superiority complex at the same time.”

“It’s true. After so many years of war, closed off from the world and focused on the objective of final victory, we now have many preconceptions about the world and the policy of opening up. We find ourselves at a disadvantage and lacking in confidence and yet fascinated by the glory of our own victory in war.”

From then on, every time William came to Hanoi on business, he came to visit me and spend an evening at our home, in conversation with me and other members of the family. As a journalist I had travelled a great deal. I had only recently retired and was awaiting the birth of a grandson, expecting to have to take care of him. I was a bit frustrated at being restricted to the house. These evenings were a good opportunity for me to get information and exchange ideas. As for William, he felt the need to share his thoughts and told me about his travels in Asia. He asked me questions about Vietnamese culture, about Buddhism and the cost of rental apartments.

“Why is so expensive here?” William asked me once. “The price is similar to that in Paris. Perhaps you know of someone who can rent me an affordable room to establish my office in Hanoi? I know that you are well-educated and that some of your ancestors’ names are inscribed at the Temple of Literature. Since you are born and bred in Hanoi, you must have many connections.”

I saw before me a young investor freshly arrived in Vietnam who still lacked friends. While he knew Japan and China, every country has its own practices and customs. It can be complicated. However, he also had the gift of communication. He had taken attended the marriage of his cousin in Saigon, helping to take the wedding offerings to the family of the bride. He also tried to learn Vietnamese. After a year and a half in Vietnam I found that he had a good feeling and skill in communication with various groups within society, from the young to the elderly. In a country of which he knew little, he tried to use practical methods to develop his knowledge of the culture by visiting the families of his acquaintances.

In his leisure time he played tennis and looked for conversational opportunities, which is say leading a healthy life, without losing himself in futile behaviour. He had formed many interesting views on painting and architecture during his travels in East Asia. He described to me the picturesque scenery of Myanmar, of Laos and the Lunar New Year festival in Hong Kong with fireworks in the harbour.

“The sunsets over the Mekong at Luang Prabang are so lovely. The pointed rooves of the temples combined with the leaves of the coconut palms make for a peaceful scene.” In thinking of Mandalay, I asked him his impressions of the royal palace and in Hue the tombs of the Nguyen emperors. He compared them to the palaces and tombs of the Ming and Qing emperors in and near Beijing, which he had visited.

“In my opinion the imperial tombs in China are too grandiose. One feels overwhelmed by the huge statues and massive palace-style buildings. I prefer the mausoleums in Hue, especially those of Minh Mang and of Tu Duc. One feels no difference between the resting place of the dead and that of the living. They seemed more like summer residences, without luxury and in beautiful scenery. I found it peaceful there, influenced by the feeling of intimacy and harmony between man and nature. It is marvellous and not somewhere one wants to visit only once. One longs to return again and again.”

“It is true. When I visited the mausoleum of King Tu Duc in 1977, I saw students from Hue who had come there to revise for their exams. After visiting the tomb, my 10-year-old son exclaimed:”How wonderful to be a king.”

Later on, around the middle of Spring 1992, William came to say goodbye before returning to Hong Kong. He had just been promoted to head a business division of Jardine Matheson. I guessed that he must be quite happy to return to Hong Kong. He had once told me how Queen Victoria, when told about Hong Kong, had said: “Why cling to this rock? We are wasting money in having our troops defend this distant land.” Hong Kong, which had been a base for fishermen and pirates in southern China, had

become in the 19th century a strategic base for the British and in the 20th century the leading container port in the world and a financial centre. I congratulated him on his promotion at 30. He smiled and said: "I was born in the year of the Tiger, according to Vietnamese astrology. Is it not a good sign?"

"In your case one might say that the Tiger has wings. What good fortune. In Hanoi or Saigon where could one find a young Vietnamese born in the year of the Tiger and given such responsibility?"

William burst out laughing. Then he exclaimed; "I have already told you that the Vietnamese leaders don't put their trust in young people even when they have lots of experience."

By chance I came across William again when I visited Beijing in the Spring of 1993. Since I had already been to the famous sites, he invited me to go to the luxurious Summer Palace, built for the Empress Dowager and Regent Cixi (1835-1908) in the outskirts of Beijing. She had spent all the money raised to build a navy on the reconstruction of this palace that had been destroyed during the 2nd Opium War in 1860. This time I was fortunate to have a guide who knew not only the art history, but also the history of China. He explained many details of the architecture, the means of ventilating the halls to keep them fresh without air-conditioning, and the story behind the paintings on the ceiling of the kilometre long gallery, as we walked around the lake. We rested for a while in the shade of a lilac in flower at the foot of the artificial mountain on top of which was situated the temple of Guanyin, the goddess of compassion. William explained how millions of farmers had been mobilized to build the temple. On a flat piece of ground, with baskets, the poor people had had to dig the immense artificial lake and transport the earth to build the mountain. He pointed towards the marble boat, saying: "What an irony! As a memorial of the plan to build a navy the dowager empress left us this immobile structure."

I had learnt about the life of Cixi in the work of Pearl Buck *Imperial Woman: The Story of the Last Empress*. In fact, everything I knew about China came from the pages of Pearl Buck. I enjoyed her engaging style, her realism and her profound understanding of the grim life of the farmers and of citizens of various levels of society (East Wind, West Wind; Pavilion of Women; The Patriot and many more). Daughter of American missionaries in China, Pearl Buck had been born there and knew the Chinese language as if it had been her mother tongue.

I gazed at the little statues of Buddha attached to the grand gateway to the path that leads to the temple above. Among the hundreds of statues, I found some that had lost their heads. "I've been told that they were damaged during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s." William said without emotion. I felt beaten down myself. In Vietnam, the statue of the Buddha of

Compassion with a thousand eyes and a thousand arms is the incarnation of salvation for the unfortunate, those overwhelmed with distress. For example, sailors in a storm would pray to the goddess to bring them safely to land. Because of the unfathomable sufferings and misfortunes of mankind, the goddess needed a thousand eyes and arms to be able to give succour to all. I wondered whether the Empress Dowager Cixi, formidable, ambitious and inebriated with power, had built this temple to the goddess in order to make amends for her own bad karma.

After our outing William suggested that we have dinner in a Japanese restaurant in the Peking Hotel. He said to me: "I invite you to a Japanese style meal with sashimi." The waitresses were dressed in kimono, something really new to me. The fish had been placed in little wooden boats, covered in decoration. There were also green noodles served with seaweed. In Vietnam we had no custom of sitting on tatami mats with our legs crossed, so here we were able to sit with our legs in a pit under the table, as if we were kneeling. This seemed eminently practical.

We parted like old friends. We had a few more encounters, either in Hanoi or on the occasion of the wedding of my nephew in Ho Chi Minh City. This nephew had told me that William had left China at the end of the 1990s to work in an art museum in California. After years of running around the Far East he had set himself up on the other side of the Pacific.

Five: An example of devoted service in the battle against famine in South-East Asia

Since our plan to travel by airplane to Dien Bien Phu with Michael Call had been cancelled, we had to go by car the very next day as we were short of time. We were not going as tourists, but on behalf of American OXFAM to work on a project to assist the women of ethnic minorities in the remote regions of north-west Vietnam in their fight against poverty and famine.



With Michael Call, Oxfam America representative, in Dien Bien Phu and Lai Chau for the project assisting Thai, Hmong, and Kho Mu minority women, 1990.

With Michael Call, Oxfam America representative, in Dien Bien Phu and Lai Chau for the project assisting Thai, Hmong, and Kho Mu minority women, 1990.

We had gone on the 18th of May 1990 to Noi Bai airport, where we found the weather to be clement; but after waiting for three hours, we were told that airplane could not take off because the weather in Dien Bien Phu was too cloudy. I sighed: “We have been defeated just like the French in Dien Bien Phu in 1954”. We recalled how the French had in 1953-4 constructed a military base in this remote mountainous region without properly understanding the weather pattern; their assumption was that they could keep the base supplied with weapons, food and medicines by air, while the Viet Minh did not have the logistical ability to undertake long-drawn-out operations. Nevertheless...

We had not wasted the three hours of waiting. Michael had told me his life story: he was a Canadian, strong, silver-haired and with big, wide-open eyes that reflected his goodness from behind his spectacles. He expressed himself in a soft voice. His family had lived through the drama of a divorce that had left the adolescent children with their father. After this shock to their confidence, he and his siblings had not recovered their faith in family happiness.

Since he craved adventure, after university he had chosen to come to Vietnam as a teacher of English. Even though Vietnam was far away, the news of the victory at Dien Bien Phu had inspired him to get to know this country better. In the 1960s he could not go to Hanoi, so had travelled to Hue to learn Vietnamese and then gone to Buon Ma Thuot in the central highlands to teach English. After a few years, as the situation in South Vietnam got worse, he left and went to work, first for the Canadian Embassy and then for NGOs in Indonesia, the Philippines and Laos. He had taken a great interest in the life of the ethnic minorities in Laos and had visited many remote villages where the inhabitants still practiced slash and burn agriculture. He had drunk manioc alcohol with them. I understood that the others in the WTO office did not want to go so far; only Michael wanted to work on a project with the minority tribal women of the region around Dien Bien Phu.

We had had to remain stuck at the airport for hours waiting to see whether we might be called for boarding. A young man had passed us and Michael had to suppress his laughter upon reading the slogan on his T-shirt. When I expressed surprise, he explained the text to me: “Do you know what is on

his T-shirt: you cannot soar like an eagle if your boss is a turkey.” I thought that Michael had a good sense of observation and saw everything that went on around us.

By 11am it was over. We had to return to Hanoi to book a car and drive the distance to Dien Bien Phu, which would take a day and a half. We left early the next day in a car we had booked with the National Union of Women.

In Hoa Binh we found houses built with wood and bamboo and raised on stilts belonging to the Muong minority. When Michael got out of the car the children ran up to him crying “*Liên Xô, Liên Xô*.” This reminded me of when the Russians had been in Hoa Binh to build a hydroelectric power plant. Obviously, the children thought that all westerners were Russian.

At lunch time we had a meal in a small restaurant on the Moc Chau plateau about 150 km from Hanoi. The scenery was attractive with the green of tea plantations and plum trees. We were entering the territory of the Thai minority. Michael pointed out what a shame it was that the locals all played western music and not their own traditional music with gongs and flutes. I thought that perhaps foreigners were rare at the restaurant and that the locals played western music to please them.

When we were still 100 km from Moc Chau in the region of Son La the scenery became boring and we were tired out by the bumpy roads and the heat of the May sun. I tried singing some popular folk songs with Khanh, the interpreter of English, in order to keep the driver awake. At one point we passed a Thai wedding procession on the road. The bride was dressed in a beautiful embroidered black turban, while the groom was in indigo blue. The maids of honour, two by two, carried new mattresses and other offerings from the bride to her new husband’s family, as was the custom. I was astonished to see two girls carrying the heavy trunk of the bride, while the drunken young men tottered along in the middle of the road, indifferent to the noise of our horn.

We made it to Son La, capital of Son La province, home of the Thai at about 5 pm. I was disappointed not to have been able to visit the former penitentiary at Son La and the cemetery for political prisoners where one of my maternal cousins was buried after dying of malaria in 1933 after two years of hard labour. My mother had always said that he had been an excellent draughtsman and poet, with excellent French. In the court case he had not used a lawyer, but had pleaded his case himself in French, saying that he had been a good patriot, but against colonialism. From the provincial guest house, we could only just see the ruins of the penitentiary in the valley below.

After a night of rest, we continued on our way to Dien Bien Phu, crossing the mountain pass at Pha Din (which in Thai means heaven and earth, since at most times of year the clouds cover the peaks). This was the location of

heavy bombing by the French who tried to prevent the transit of supplies by the enemy during the battle of Dien Bien Phu. In peacetime we could simply enjoy the magnificent view from an elevation of 1648 meters above sea level, with ranges of mountains disappearing into the distance.

After the descent from the top of the pass, Michael told me: "The driver came down in neutral, which is extremely dangerous." Another 85 km and we arrived in Dien Bien Phu.

We were given a warm welcome by two Thai ladies from the Women's Union of Dien Bien Phu. Without any delay they took us to the A-1 redoubt (Elaine), the screen that General de Castries had used to protect his HQ from artillery fire. When this last bastion had fallen around midnight on the 6th of May, General Giap had ordered the final advance and the HQ had surrendered at 17:30 hrs. on 7th of May 1954. A French tank still sits at the summit of the hill. Michael took a photograph with the Thai ladies. I said jokingly to the Thai ladies: "Isn't that a prisoner of war in your photograph?" Michael retorted: "No joking! I am perfectly well aware that Dien Bien Phu marks the end of colonialism in the whole world and I am proud to be able to visit this historic site."

We had no time to visit the HQ of General de Castries or the museum because we needed to get on with our project. Nonetheless, from the top of the A-1 redoubt we saw a panorama of the Muong Thanh depression in mid harvest. Golden rice paddies stretched out before our eyes.

After lunch Michael insisted on visiting some families who had received subsidies to raise silkworms and spin the thread. It was the first occasion on which I had visited a single room Thai house, with the hearth in the middle of the floor. On one side of the door was a little garden planted with aromatic herbs. Michael himself interviewed the lady of the house on the subject of raising silkworms, feeding them with mulberry leaves, drawing the silk from the cocoons. At first the lady was timid and spoke little, but Michael was patient and wanted direct communication. He watched carefully as the lady spun a dyed cloth. She explained that the best silk was to be sold and the rest used for domestic purposes.

In the evening we were delighted by the performance of Thai *Xoè* song and dance by the two ladies we accompanied us. They sang while one of them translated; "Without *Xoè* we cannot be happy, without *Xoè* the rice doesn't grow, without *Xoè* the girls and boys do not meet." I remembered that General R. Salan in his book *Indochine Rouge* edited in 1975 had greatly appreciated the *xoe* dance of the Thai people. Then it was our turn. Since it was already quite late, I asked Michael to join me in singing the French song *Alouette, gentille alouette*, which we did to the best of our ability, with hand movements imitating those of the birds.

The next morning, we were visited by Madam Quang Thi Un of the Thai ethnicity, president of the Women's Union in Lai Chau. She came to take us to Muong Lay district where there was a project to raise sows for the women of the Hmong ethnicity. Thanks to the talk that Michael had with the Hmong ladies I learned that the forced settlement of the high mountain Hmong was the cause of their impoverishment in an unfamiliar environment. The Hmong ladies could not speak the national language, but we were helped out by Giang Thanh Xuan, an ethnic Hmong who worked in the Women's Union of Lai Chau. She had been to university and was very jovial and dynamic.

Hers was a rare case. She said: "I am the daughter of a Hmong village head and my father worked with the Kinh cadres who came from the plain. They brought leaflets with bright illustrations, which inspired me to learn to read. When the teachers came to persuade the parents to permit their children to go to school, mine agreed straight away, while many others said; "Our children cry for maize bread and sweets, but not to go to school. What's the good of that? They will surely run away."

So, the girls stay at home and from the age of 8 or 9 start embroidering their wedding gown, made of very colourful linen. It takes each child several years of detailed work to make this dress which is very broad with many folds. To begin with, they separate the fibres from the stalks of flax grown on a plot dedicated to this purpose. The girls marry at 13 or 14 years of age and take care of their parents-in-law until their death, while starting a family at about 15 or 16. At the age of 30 the women are already tired out.

Originally the Hmong houses were not on stilts, but like those of the country Kinh were made of adobe with beaten earth floors. In the mountains the Hmong live differently: they practice slash-and-burn agriculture to grow rice.

In order to prevent forest fires, the authorities had tried to get the Hmong to move into settlements at the foot of the mountains. The Hmong hamlet we visited was on the road leading to the market. This created lots of problems. The Hmong ladies were used to raising sows and piglets in the clean and dry environment of the mountains, where there was no pollution. The pigs they raised had no viruses or intestinal parasites, so other tribes happily bought pigs from them. Unfortunately, in coming off the mountains, the new environment perplexed them. The Hmong ladies, being illiterate, could not read the instructions on the vermicides and the pigs contracted diseases, which would never have happened in the mountains. They had never used chemical treatments and when epidemics spread among their herds, they were ruined.

Before the forced settlement, most of the Hmong families had had a horse for transportation; but now there was no harness in front of their houses. The project to help the poverty-stricken women was in the form of micro-credit to help them improve their pig-herding skills, while learning about nutrition and the prevention of diseases with veterinary products.

Since Michael was familiar with Hmong customs from his time in Laos, before leaving the hamlet to return to Lai Chau, he exhorted the Hmong ladies: "This money is to help you manage your family finances. Watch out. Don't give any money to your husbands for buying alcohol in the market."

I was astonished to see very young Hmong women with babies on their backs who gathered by the door and watched us with curiosity. They were silent, not smiling, their eyes sad. Xuan told me that they were 15-year-old mothers. I thought to myself: what a contrast between Xuan and these adolescent mothers.

In the late afternoon we arrived at the capital of Lai Chau province. The town of Lai Chau lies in a narrow valley, through which runs the Black River, cutting the urban area in two. It seemed a peaceful little place.

The following day, which was the 4th of our journey, we visited a hamlet populated by the Kho Mu ethnic group, about twelve or so kilometres from Lai Chau. When crossing a stream, we waded through the water. A young Kho Mu woman who spoke Vietnamese received us in her very simple stilt house, built of bamboo with mats on the floor and no mattress for the winter. She explained that they only knew how to work in the fields and, unlike the Thai women, did not know how to weave. Whenever the harvest was poor, they were thrown into misery. Their methods of food production were too simple: the pigs permitted to run wild without any pig sties. Thus, their excrement wasn't used as a source of manure, as was the case with the plains people, in order to achieve a higher crop yield.

I saw totally naked children playing in the road. The life of the Kho Mu, despite their proximity to Lai Chau, was very hard and their education level was very low. The children, especially the boys, tended to drop out of school, some even without completing elementary education. Although the school wasn't far away, the children didn't want to attend classes as they lacked the shoes and clothes worn by the Thai and Kinh children, who bullied them. Thus, I learned that the lack of educational progress of certain minorities had very specific reasons.

We had spent two days developing projects for the Thai people of Dien Bien Phu to raise silkworms and for the Hmong and the Kho Mu peoples to raise pigs at Lai Chau. In the course of discussions between the women of the Women's Union of Lai Chau and Michael representing US OXFAM, I had noticed that Michael was both an ethnographer and an instructor who persevered in encouraging even very timid women to have their say and give

their opinion. I reckoned that he must have had a lot of experience in working with minority women. He knew their problems and how to manage a project. At the end he said: "The value of the project lies in increasing family income as well as raising the prestige of women both within the family and in society at large by teaching them methods of increasing production yield, the way to manage budgets and the mutual support of women in the community."

Since micro-credit is applied by rotation, those women who were on the list of beneficiaries would overlook the management of each project in order to achieve good results and to ensure that all could gain from the interest earned by the project.

In the discussion sessions, Michael was very determined and sometimes seemed even intransigent, but I understood that it was to protect the interests of the poorer women. For example, in order to understand the procurement of silk fibre, he asked to meet with the government monopoly in order to understand the purchasing process. While the assistant director received us, suddenly the director returned from running an errand and insisted that his deputy gave way. This was a shame as he didn't know much and, in the end, we had to demand the return of his assistant to sort things out. Michael insisted that the silk fibre producers should be free to sell to anyone they wanted, in Hanoi or elsewhere. The buying office should not insist on their monopoly status which would depress prices and fail to stimulate production. Thus, we worked without cease until the last day of our visit.

Michael confided in me: "I must understand all the issues in detail because I have to win over the management committee of US OXFAM when I return to the United States. I hope that the result will be positive and that you will get the funds you need." It was the truth. After several months, the women of Lai Chau received the sum of USD40,000 for the two projects and I learned the projects went well, not least because of the thorough apprenticeship from inception. When I told Michael that he was a real ethnologist, he shook his head and said: "No it is too late for that." In truth he was an excellent instructor and during the week that I spent with him I learned many things about the ethnic minority women. Despite the difference in race and language he had known how to show his comprehension, his empathy and his good attitude, which won the confidence of the minority population.

It took us two days to return to Hanoi. As we passed close to the border with China, the landscape changed. Michael looked at the tea plantations at Phong Tho and told me: "They are not as well-cultivated as those at Moc Chau." We met women from other minority groups with different costumes to those of the Thai and the Hmong, without sarong or skirt, but with attire similar to the Choang tribe of Yunnan across the Chinese border.

From Binh Lu to Sapa the landscape became both exotic and picturesque like the scenery in Chinese landscape paintings. The car drove over narrow mountain passes. The mountains were steep and lofty with many waterfalls like long shawls of natural silk. From time to time, Michael asked the driver to pull over so that he could look at the landscape and take photographs. He said: "Since I am a vegetarian, I do not hunt animals, but hunt with my camera instead. I have never seen such glorious mountains."

Indeed, he was a vegetarian and during the journey I had to explain to him the meaning of the words Bun Thit Cho that appeared on signboards outside the many small restaurants. It embarrassed me to have to explain that the words meant Dog Meat Noodles. I was well aware that, in the West, the dog is regarded as a favourite pet, while in certain Asian countries it is raised for eating.

We drove through Sapa, at the foot of Fansipan Mountain, the highest peak in Indochina and one of the Hoang Lien Son range of mountains. Sapa, in Lao Cai Province, was the site of a famous French colonial hill town with many elegant villas and gardens. Some of the villas and other buildings had been destroyed during the war of resistance against the French, but the majority had been destroyed during the Chinese invasion of 1979. It is a shame that there only remains a church and a few stone houses. When could this place be reconstructed as a tourist destination, I asked myself? I loved this varied landscape with its bizarre Sa Mu pine-trees and the Dao minority's rice terrace fields. All this made for a fascinating return journey.

Nonetheless, after a night of rain spent in Bao Thang, where battles against both the French and the Chinese had been fought, we came across channels of flood water and, on the road to Yen Bai, our progress was blocked by a large tree that had fallen from the hillside onto the road. The locals were already busy fixing up an alternative route, so the drivers could do nothing but cross their arms and wait it out. After an hour of waiting, we could see a long line of vehicles. People were getting anxious and one of the drivers started shouting: "Come on. Let's roll up our sleeves and move the tree to the side of the road! Heave ho! Heave ho!" And the road was cleared. We made it back to Hanoi in the afternoon.

Michael only needed to collect his luggage and return to Bangkok after seven days travelling in the north-west.

For myself it had been a journey rich in experiences. Michael had taken all the incidents of the trip in his stride. I guessed that he was used to life among tribal peoples. I wondered why so many young people wanted to go to Canada, thinking it a promised land. Michael had chosen to spend all his youth in South-East Asia and I admired his devotion, his perseverance and his empathy for the poorest.

Six: An affection for Vietnam dating from childhood

In 2003 I spent four months at the home of Dr. Marie-Eve HOFFET for the purpose of learning how to write an account of one's life. She was president of the NT-Psy Association which underwrote the activities of the N-T Centre run by the late Dr. Nguyen Khac Vien.



At Marie-Eve HOFFET's home.

At Marie-Eve HOFFET's home.

On one occasion she had asked me to translate into French an article written by Professor Dr. Nguyen Van Chien about her father, sometime professor at the University of Vietnam. The author had been her father's assistant in the Geology Department at the University during the francophone countries summit conference in 1997.

Dr. HOFFET had told me all about the hectic life and experiences of her father Josue Heilmann HOFFET. After obtaining a degree in natural science he had set out for Indochina in 1927 in order to work on a doctoral thesis in geology, but later became interested in palaeontology. He had worked for the Geology Service in Hanoi where he studied the continental formations of Lower Laos. He needed to cross the entire central region of Indochina and the Annamite (Truong Son) range of mountains. When the roads ran out, he took to the backs of elephants.

He had lost his first wife to a serious illness in Vietnam in 1929. In 1933 he returned to Paris to defend his thesis entitled: "Geological Study of the Central Region of Indochina between Tourane (Da Nang) and the Mekong". Following this he designed a geological map of southern Laos. He was awarded a prize by the Academy of Sciences in Paris.

After he had remarried, choosing as his wife the young woman who would become the mother of Dr. Hoffet, he returned to Indochina where he became lecturer in geology at the University of Indochina. He began to write up his research on the dinosaurs of Laos and to design the geological map of Northern Laos. Meanwhile his wife took on the training of the leaders of the Vietnamese girl-scouts. He was also keen on ethnology and made detailed notes and drawings of the way of life of the Ta Oi minority, which lives on the flanks of the Truong Son range. His archive is held at the Museum of Mankind in Paris. In applied research he discovered gold dust in the valley of the Ma River and worked out the supply of drinking water for the city of Danang.

In 1940 the Japanese invaded Vietnam and Professor Hoffet joined the resistance against the Japanese and provided essential assistance to the movement of Vietnamese scouts. He took to the countryside just before the Japanese military coup of March 1945. He was caught in an ambush at the time of the clashes at Nui Tho in Son La province in April 1945 with a few other members of the resistance, tried to escape, but was hacked to death by a Japanese cavalryman. Since he had been reported missing, his family stayed on in Vietnam for another year before returning to France in 1946. During the days of the Revolution in August and September 1945 his wife had been surprised to see some scouts among the demonstrators and learn that they had known her husband well. Mr. Nguyen Van Chien and other scouts came to calm her after the days of upheaval and reassure her that she had nothing to fear from the Vietnamese revolutionaries.

Through the introduction of the palaeontologist Philippe Janvier who had met Professor Chien in Hanoi, Dr. M.E. Hoffet was able to contact Professor Chien, who had been her father's assistant, since she was looking for the place where he had been killed. With the assistance of Tong Duy Thanh, a student of Professor Chien, she had been able to place in that location a memorial plaque with the following text: "Here lies the body of the geologist Josue H. Hoffet" alongside a stele inscribed by Professor Chien: "Here lies J.H. Hoffet, lecturer at Hanoi University." Dr. Hoffet explained to me: "I had waited for my father to return for years. The obsession caused by this overwhelmed me since I was unable to see his body or take part in his funeral. Thanks to the memories of the people living at the foot of Nui To mountain and to this memorial plaque, I have been able to find some comfort."

I remember how Professor Chien, in his account entitled "One Sole Teacher, One Sole Pupil," had recounted how, when the scouts had gathered in Sapa "Professor Hoffet had taken me alone to explore the geology of the mountain named Five Fingers Pointing at the Sky with a Hmong guide. It was still an unexplored area, without any names on the map. He showed me how to pay close attention to geological features, to collect mineral samples and take detailed notes. Upon our return, he showed me how to write up a

report and prepare a geological map. It was in this manner that, after completing our studies in the 1941-44 class, I alone attained a degree in geological science. Then he selected me as his assistant. His last act was to present me with the key to the geology laboratory on the occasion of our last working session, before he joined the resistance and was unable to return to the university after the Japanese military coup of 9th March 1945”.

Professor Hoffet’s assistant went on to become a pioneer in geological research in post-war Vietnam, publishing many important works and being appointed to the professorial chairs in geology at both the Polytechnic Institute and Hanoi University. The quotation above demonstrates to me the importance of the teacher role: J. Hoffet left to posterity not only many lauded scientific works, but also that which is even more precious – he moulded successors capable of living up to the aspirations of their teacher.

Among his own children, the eldest became a lecturer in the natural sciences and Dr. Marie-Eve Hoffet became a doctor, winning a PhD in psychology at the age of 73 with her study of the comparative relationships between mother and daughter in the two different cultures of Vietnam and France. Her thesis was entitled: “Cultural Evaluation of the Construction of the Psychic Life of the Smallest Member of the Family: Research Based on Observations of Babies in Vietnam.”

I greatly admired her commitment and perseverance in pursuit of her research in Vietnam. She once said to me: “During my childhood, my mother was very busy with her work educating the elite in Hanoi and thus it was Chi Hai (the nanny) who took care of me between the time when I was weaned and the age of five. For this reason, I am more Vietnamese than French in the core of my being. I am naturally drawn to Vietnam.

Between 1997 and finishing my thesis in 2011 I have shuttled between Paris, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to gather materials on the spot. I was already 59 when I returned to Vietnam, but I took a great interest in the mother-child relationship. This subject allowed me to study the method by which wisdom gets passed from one generation to the next. So, I decided to study and work on a thesis based on this subject. In my opinion it would be pointless to prescribe psychological treatment for troubled Vietnamese children based on what is the practice in France and without taking the special characteristics of Vietnamese society into account.”

Dr. Hoffet had interviewed young mothers of nuclear families and of families with three generations under one roof. She also encountered the grandmothers of extended families and told me that in Vietnam the family played a supportive role, acting as a back-up for young parents working away from the home. According to her, children can learn a lot from close proximity with their grandparents thanks to the atmosphere and the varied conversation.

On one occasion Dr. Marie-Eve Hoffet asked me to arrange for her group of specialists to visit an old village in the neighbourhood of Hanoi. This lucky circumstance enabled me to discover the natal village of my paternal ancestor Nguyen Nhu Do who had been a well-known literatus in the 15th century. His village is 18km from Hanoi and his biography is recorded in the genealogical record in Chinese characters passed down by my grandfather. There were five people in our group: Dr. Hoffet and Dr. Claude Pigott, both psychiatrists (members of NT Psy and of the Franco-Vietnamese Friendship Association), Dr. Pigott's daughter, a student of music and a sociologist, with me acting as interpreter.

Dai Lan is a very old village on the banks of the Red River, the birthplace of Red River Culture and has origins going back 3000 years to the Hung kings. Since we had made arrangements in advance, we were warmly welcomed and given lots of useful information. Among the representatives of the village there were the village chief, the head of the association of retired people and Pham Xuan Lang, who was in charge of the preservation of village culture.

Dr. Hoffet wanted to know all about the stories that defined the particular culture of this village, the relationship between the genealogical account of the village preserved at the temple of the tutelary god, with the biographies of all the mandarins recorded therein and also mentioned on the stelae at the Temple of Literature in Hanoi, as well as in the genealogical records of the families themselves. Apart from introducing the civil achievements and the exploits of the tutelary gods preserved in the lacquer box in front of the altar, Mr. Lang also explained to us in detail the story of the three tutelary gods who had achieved great exploits in the struggle against the Thuc aggressors from the north; after the victory the Hung kings had promoted them to the lordship of this land of the right bank of the Red River, where they had built this village which had prospered over time.

The inhabitants venerated them as the tutelary genius of the Dai Lan Village. On the right side of the main altar had been built a smaller altar in honour of Nguyen Nhu Do (1424-1526), a literatus of the 15th century who had come second in the civil service examinations recorded on the stelae at the Temple of Literature as having taken place in 1442. Thanks to the innovations in national education introduced by Nguyen Trai, the strategist and supreme advisor to King Le Loi and hero of national liberation in the early 15th century, the gifted Nguyen Nhu Do, despite being born into a poor family, had benefitted from a communal scholarship. Early in life he had been exempted from work on public projects so that he could concentrate on his studies. He had been promoted to the rank of doctor of letters at the age of 19. He had thrice been sent to China in the capacity of deputy

ambassador, the last time when he was 35. He had persuaded the Chinese to abandon the tribute in pearls that had brought so much danger to the divers.

After returning to Vietnam, he had been appointed minister of personnel by King Le Thanh Tong, a position that demands integrity, righteousness and a high degree of responsibility, for the remainder of his 36-year reign. He had offered all the gifts he had received from the court in Beijing to the communal temple upon the completion of his missions. Mr. Lang translated for us the rhyming couplets which illustrated how an ingenious diplomacy could result in the recall of threatening armies.

Since he had been both a candidate in and an examiner of the doctoral exams at the National University during his civil service career, he was appointed in retirement rector of the National University for a period of ten years. He devoted himself to linking the course of study closely to the realities of civil administration and keeping a close eye on the capabilities of the students.

In addition to his varied activities as civil servant, diplomat, counsellor and educator, he was also a poet, although few of his works have been collected. Those that survive illustrate the simple and serene life of a senior mandarin who spent his declining years raising vegetables and medicinal plants. He lived to the age of 102 and the day of his death, the 6th day of the 1st month of the lunar year, was made a feast day in Dai Lan village.

After leaving the community house we moved to the temple close by. A nun named Dieu Tam who was literate in Chinese script acted as our guide and translated all the inscriptions at the temple. Dr. Pigott and Dr. Hoffet were especially interested in the inscriptions at the gateway: "Remove all the dust of daily existence before you enter this temple" and in the two statues of guardian deities on either side of the gate; on the right the one who encourages beneficence with a serene visage and holding a pearl, while the one on the left, armed with a hammer, is ready to punish the wicked.

Dr. Pigott demonstrated to us how the first guardian deity might also be said to illustrate the role of speech in the pursuit of psychological therapy. He was pleased with the nun's explanation of Buddhism in Vietnam and the religious practices of the villagers since he had grown up in India and yet knew little of this subject. In the temple we also found a statue of a veiled female figure which had been erected to commemorate the woman who had introduced mulberry trees and silkworm cultivation to the village. Furthermore, the head of the retired people's association told us about the pursuits of those who wrote poetry or took part in the performance of traditional music. This was pleasing to the musicologist among us who greatly appreciated the preservation of traditional culture and national identity.

All this time Dr. Hoffet was busy with her tape-recorder so that what was said could be transcribed subsequently. Everyone appreciated the visit to Dai Lan village with its wealth of cultural traditions, its picturesque scenery and fields of green vegetables that supplied the capital. For myself, having taken part in the village festival and listened to what the village chief had to say, I knew more of the life of this ancestor who had so influenced my grandfather. His life demonstrated the importance of commitment and hard work from an early age. He was also interested in the study of vegetables and medicinal plants. My father had been a pharmacist trained in France, but had also shown interest in the use of medicinal plants as prescribed by the great 14th century scholar Tue Tinh, who had said: “the people of our country should learn how to use the medicinal plants that grow here”. Nowadays, herbal medicine and ethno-therapies show that these ideas of our ancestors are still current.

I also considered that the dedication shown by Dr. Hoffet to this research was perhaps due to the family tradition inherited from her father.

Seven: Travelling with Dr. Bernard Doray to A Luoi

The association named “Vietnam, Children of Dioxin (Viet Nam, Enfants de la Dioxine (VNED))” was established in France in 2001



The 1st group of VNED members in Lyon 2002.

The 1st group of VNED members in Lyon 2002. following the visit of Madam Nguyen Thi Binh, at that time Vice-President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Madam Binh had made an appeal to all Western nations to take part in providing essential assistance to the victims of Agent Orange, following the unification of the country. The spraying of Agent Orange had ceased some

30 years prior to this, but the after-effects were proving even more appalling and limitless for the population. At that moment I happened to be present in Paris and thanks to Madam Xuan Phuong, at that time secretary general of the VNED, I became a kind of link in Hanoi between VNED and the families of the victims of dioxin, acting as interpreter and translator of letters between the foster parents who had helped the stricken children from the earliest time.

Dr. Bernard Doray, then vice president of the VNED and president of CEDRATE (the French research centre for trauma and exclusion) had undertaken to do research into and medical examinations of child victims of Agent Orange/dioxin on the lists prepared by VNED for the A Luoi district (in Thua Thien-Hue province on the border with Laos) which was one of the areas most devastated by the chemical war and where 85% of the inhabitants were impoverished ethnic minorities who had been dispossessed of their ancestral forests by the defoliants.

In 2002 the road to A Luoi was very steep with many bends and the Ho Chi Minh highway which crossed the district from north to south was under construction with a chaos of earth, rocks and concrete. Dr. Bernard Doray, a psychiatrist, and his wife Conception, a psychoanalyst, showed such dedication to their research into traumas on the ground, that I was filled with energy beyond my then 67 years. The two teachers who managed the little restaurant were astonished by the flow of our conversation during meals, regardless of the quality or otherwise of the meals.

During their first visit, for the purpose of classifying the conditions and health of the child victims of dioxin, the medical couple worked ceaselessly with only half-an-hour of relaxation at lunchtime, despite the torrid heat and lack of ventilation. In those days there was not even electricity in A Luoi. The doctor from Hue was quite astonished to see Dr. Doray sitting on the ground to examine the knee of a 7-year-old boy, without any concern for the chicken excrement all around. That day we had visited a family with four deaf children, according to the Red Cross agent in the Hong Van commune. We were greeted cordially by the father who was alone in the house. His medals demonstrated his meritorious military service. He had been badly wounded and sent to the north for rehabilitation. While there he had met a young woman from the same Pa Co ethnic group who was in high school. She became his wife. His wife acted as the civil organizer of the Women's Union in the commune.

On the occasion of our visit to Hong Van, where the Women's Union had their office, we found the wife to be friendly and open. Her younger daughter, clinging to her mother, reacted to sonar stimulation, but her eyes were blank. She seemed to be totally introverted. Her mother thus demonstrated to us the effect on children of an abusive father who still suffered from post-traumatic stress 30 years after the war had ended. The

children were shell-shocked by their father's violent behaviour. The youngest and most fragile seemed to be at war with his ears that took in all these horrors. All the boys and the girl were afraid to be sent back to school because of their poor hearing. Fortunately, the teachers were compassionate and placed them in the front of the class, where they were obedient and hard-working despite their handicap.

On the way back Dr. Doray recalled the case of Duong The Su, whose family we had visited at Linh Nam, near to Hanoi. This gracious child had found a way to protect himself from the rages of his father. Not that he was inclined to strike his children, but during the night and in the crowded environment of his little house, this traumatized man, who had rendered courageous service in the air-defence corps, relived his experience of war with the screaming of orders and canon explosions. His son knew nothing of the risks of war and applied himself quite visibly to become a completely different kind of person from a warrior. He liked everything his mother liked and she liked nothing more than putting on performances of *Len Dong* shamanism (practices related to Viet/Kinh beliefs in the mother goddesses of the three realms of water, forest and mountain) for her well-dressed friends. Su gave up going to school and preferred to work as a waiter in a restaurant where he could wear stylish uniforms.

Dr. Doray pointed out that the American Association of Psychiatry had in 1980 established a classification of mental illness that was objective, atheoretical and purely descriptive and thus could be of universal application, known as DMS III (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). It meant that all the problems relating to trauma could be classified under the name of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. Dr. Doray shook his head while saying that this definition of disorder allowed for no moral distinction to be applied to the violent causes.

In the company of the Dorays over the three trips we made to A Luoi, I noticed that, despite the language barrier, it was possible to express empathy with facial expression and tone of voice. This was evident from our visit to the Truong family in Hong Kim commune



Dr. B. Doray and J. Maitre with the teaching staff at Hong Kim primary school - A Luoi 2005.

Dr. B. Doray and J. Maitre with the teaching staff at Hong Kim primary school - A Luoi 2005. , where there was a case of grave mental disorder.

On the occasion of our first visit, the father had not hesitated to tell us all about his war service which he had completed with distinction as evidenced by his many scars. He also had met his wife when sent to hospital in the North. He told us of the sweat that could freeze him whenever there was a storm, most likely because it reminded him of the rumbling of canons.

During his turbulent nights he did not dream, but relived his experiences: anti-personnel mines exploded, he crawled on blood-soaked ground, his comrades helped him as he vacated himself. He screamed. Worst of all were the severe wounds of his comrades in arms: the entrails spewing out of the torso or a head or arm separated from their bodies. These scenes revisited him frequently in nightmares. Sometimes he yelled at the top of his voice in the middle of the night, causing his wife and children to be overcome with worry.

While this exchange was going on, his son Truong emerged like a wild devil from the dark lean-to which was his lair. Big child or adult, it was hard to tell. He got around on his single leg. His appearance in the middle of his father's account of scattered limbs on the field of battle made his appearance seem like the visitation of some lost soul: his right arm had been amputated at the hand and his left hand had lost several fingers, his right leg was short of a foot: all this the result of the explosion of an American grenade several years after the end of the war. His appearance was neglected and his hair was long and unkempt.

While I engaged the parents, Dr. Doray tried to chat with Truong by means of hand gestures and looks. His mother lamented: "There is no point in talking to him. He knows absolutely nothing, poor thing. From the age of 3 he has done nothing but moan and cry. Truong had never been to school and always lived a life apart. He enjoyed digging in the garden.

One day he had been blasted 5 meters when his pick had struck by accident an American grenade buried in the soil. Without a right hand or a right leg, he could do nothing but stagger over to the school to watch the children at play or go to the market, where the other children would mock him and give him cigarettes with which to burn his own flesh. You can see the scars from the burns on his thorax, his arm and his stomach. He flies into a rage easily and will fight anyone, even us his parents."

However, to our astonishment Dr. Doray was able to get Truong to open his heart. While I translated, Truong spoke almost in the same manner as any other person. He expressed his feelings clearly. For example, he said: "I hate the Americans who caused such pain to me and my father; but were they to come here in the same way as this kind man with white skin and a moustache, I would be delighted to talk to them."

Dr. Doray revealed to us a different way of thinking about the burn scars, which he explained Truong regarded as the equivalent of the scars of war born by his father: a visible proof of the pain which would disappear along with the scar tissue, which could not be the case with psychological damage. Truong himself said that: "the cigarette burns are painful, but at least cause no fear."

Dr. Doray told his parents to speak kindly to him and above all not to abuse him on account of his handicap or his mental deficiency. I myself observed how Truong was well able to express his feelings for Dr. Doray. On one occasion the doctor misjudged the undulating beaten-earth floor and fell off the bench on which he had been seated and Truong was full of concern for him. Since the doctor was often distracted by other things, he had left his jacket on the bench when leaving the house, but Truong had kindly brought it to him, despite his hopping gait.

It was certain that Truong's condition would change for the better if his parents were to change their attitude to him, as recommended by Dr. Doray. However, I had my doubts since the parents were so deprived, the father with his war wounds and the mother overcome with the burden of having six mouths to feed. Before we left, I asked him what present he would like us to bring on our next visit and he said without hesitation: "A wheelchair."

His mother explained that it was because he was unable to use crutches. Also, a humanitarian organization had offered to provide Truong with artificial limbs, but it would be too complicated and too painful. Certainly, a wheelchair would not have the same limitations and would furthermore give a certain prestige to its driver.

Before leaving, Dr. Doray took a portrait photograph of Truong



J. Maitre listens to the life stories of dioxin victims after dinner

J. Maitre listens to the life stories of dioxin victims after dinner in order to enhance his self-esteem and promised to deliver it on his next visit. Two years later, I managed to sort out the delivery of this promised gift, with which Truong was delighted.

I had not been present when the wheelchair had been delivered, but Dr. Doray had told me, upon his return from A Luoi to Hanoi, that this delivery had been an important moment in Truong's rehabilitation and recovery of a sense of dignity and position within the family. Dressed smartly for the occasion Truong had clung to the hand of his visitor as well as to the framed photograph which established him as a person of consequence.

I was well-pleased since I had always thought that Truong's long hair and moustaches worn like an old man were in order to earn some respect from the kids at the marketplace. He had suffered grievously from their taunts at his hopping on one foot.

Sadly, his joy was short-lived. On Dr. Doray's final visit in 2009, his family had told how only a week after the arrival of his wheelchair, there had been a road accident. He had not been physically hurt, but the wheelchair was rendered out of order. Nonetheless, we could see that Truong had re-established himself within the bosom of his family. He acted in a different manner, calling his sister to the telephone and playing cards with his little

brother. In other words, this wheelchair had acted as a comet that, while making only a brief apparition, carried a message that not everything is immutable. Dr. Doray took comfort from this thought.

In April 2002, I visited A Luoi once again with Dr. Doray, on the occasion of a medical visit of the French association of the VNED,



Visiting a family in Dong Son (A Luoi), the epicentre of dioxin near the former American base at A So - 2003

Visiting a family in Dong Son (A Luoi), the epicentre of dioxin near the former American base at A So - 2003 which had provided assistance to about twenty handicapped children in the period 2002-4. We had been to visit the family of Ho Van Phong, himself contaminated by Agent Orange, who had a son and a daughter troubled with grave mental damage and a lame little boy. On that day we were unable to talk to Thieng the eldest son who stayed at home and slept in a corner of the sole bamboo bed; we had already been told of a case of infanticide perpetrated by this young man when he had drowned his own son. As for the daughter we had seen her in the road, but she had fled at the sight of us.

On this occasion, in April 2005, we were revisiting this family. On our arrival I was taken aback by the extent to which things had changed. In the place of a six-metre shack made of wattle enclosing a narrow bed that had to do for all ten members of the family with an external kitchen for use during the day, I was now shown a house with wooden walls, a corrugated iron roof and windows with curtains as in the homes of some commune officials. Inside I could see three modern beds made of wood with coloured mats and two wardrobes, of which the larger one had a mirror. On the chest of drawers there were a television and a fan. It was as if a fairy had waved her wand.

Ho Van Phong received us, as his wife and daughter-in-law were in the fields. He seemed eager to explain to us the astonishing transformation:

“This house was built a year and a half ago by my 4th son who had learnt to saw wood thanks to a grant from the VNED. As the government had a huge project named programme 135 to replace all shacks with solid houses, he was able to make a lot of money and the demand had been enormous. He had bought all this furniture. Alas, he had died the month before, after being paralyzed from the waist down and then over his entire body. Once he was no longer able to chew with his jaws locked it was the end, poor man. He alone had been supporting the whole family.”

While the father was feverishly searching in a large cupboard for his son's ID card in order to remember his exact date of birth, I noticed that there were 5 or 6 new sarongs hanging inside. I wondered whether this young man of only 25 had in fact died of exhaustion from over work. What would now become of this family that had lost its main support? The guide told us that Ho Van Phong had been in many bitter conflicts and still had nightmares that caused him to shout out in the night. Now the death of his son had come as a new shock. When Dr. Doray asked about the daughter he answered: “She is bewitched by the demons of the forest. No point in taking her to hospital. I have twice sacrificed oxen to propitiate the demons, but she continues to wander here and there.”

We attempted a conversation with Thieng the infanticide son, who told us that he had mistaken his son for a rat and had drowned him in the stream. Before leaving, Dr. Doray took a photograph of him in his capacity as father of two girls, born since the tragedy. When two years later we made our last visit to this family, we were received with considerable warmth. The family appeared to be suffering less. Dr Doray showed Thieng the framed photograph from the previous visit, which he gazed at for a long time.

As with the case of Truong at Hong Kim village, this photograph taken by Dr. Doray had restored some of the dignity of the man rejected by society as a result of his illness. Since his mother and wife had returned to the house, Dr. Doray took another, group photograph. Thieng was delighted to be surrounded by his family.

On the way back to Hanoi I was troubled by the many problems of the people in A Luoi. During our investigations on the ground and thanks to the clinical work of Dr. Doray and his wife I had understood that material assistance alone, without moral and psychological support, was insufficient and that they needed to be brought to bear in unison. Dr. Doray pointed out that the family portrait photographs had served the purpose of rehabilitating Truong and Thieng in the eyes of their families and restoring their sense of personal dignity. He could not judge whether the effects

would endure, but nonetheless this could remind us how traumas are passed on and how one can occasionally have some influence on the course of events.

As for Jacques Maitre, the sociologist confided to us that, in the twilight of his life (he was already 84 on the last visit in 2009), it had been a lesson in humanity to see these people at A Luoi who had suffered so unimaginably and in such unspeakable ways. We felt totally at ease in the company of these people who knew how the engagement of persons with others, when there could be no question of vengeance, could be based on the communication of the commonality of beings who were making their best efforts to simply be human.

For myself I thought how blessed I was to find in my retirement the opportunity to work with a team of scholars of human sciences who were conscientious, hard-working and who took me into a distant and secluded region of my own country that had been devastated by the war, into the company of the indigenous minority peoples of the Truong Son range, people who had bravely faced the challenges of war and peace and with whom we enjoyed an exchange full of brotherly love.

Eight: The benefits of mutual assistance born of compassion

One evening in the summer of 2010 I received a telephone call from a young woman



Pa Co Le Thi Cam, a dioxin victim who lost fingers on her hand, and Dam Thu

Pa Co Le Thi Cam, a dioxin victim who lost fingers on her hand, and Dam Thu who spoke Vietnamese without any accent: “Can you guess who I am? I am Cam from A Luoi, but right now I am in Hanoi with people from the People’s Committee of Hong Thuong. I cannot visit you because we are going to Ha Long Bay first thing tomorrow.

How could I forget Cam, a Pa-Co girl from A Luoi? Seven years prior, I had met her with her father who had been contaminated by dioxin while in the army. She had been born with two fingers missing from each hand. I had met her by accident as I left their home. She was wearing a colourful sarong and

had a fair skin in comparison with the prevalent swarthy features of that region. She hung her head and answered my questions reluctantly and sadly. She was 23 years old. She had failed the final upper secondary school exam held a few months previously in Hue. Obviously, she was unable to work in the fields with her infirmity. What would be her fate? I put a choice before her:

“It would be better for you to prepare to retake your exams in May next year with the firm intention of passing them. I know Phan Thanh Tam, the auxiliary doctor in charge of the family planning and demographic centre for the district. She is of Ta-Oi ethnicity and she also failed the exams on first taking them and only passed on the second attempt. After that she did three years of studies to become an auxiliary doctor. I can well imagine the negative feelings that you have experienced in meeting with this set back. Since you perhaps don’t have the money to study for another year, I am in a position to guarantee your fees for this final year and the cost of the exams in Hue. It’ll be your last chance”.

In order to gain her confidence, I gave her the 200,000 dong that were in my pocket and which would be sufficient to cover the first month’s fees. We exchanged letters throughout the succeeding months. I was taken aback by the clear and moving expression of her feelings. She opened her bruised heart to me, explaining how isolated and inferior she had felt amidst the dismayed glances of her schoolfellows when they saw her deformed hands and the homesickness she had felt in the strange city, far from her village and her family. This was why she had not worked as hard as she might and had failed the exam. When I shook her by the hand, without fear of the deformity, quite the reverse of the reaction she had from others and gave her words of encouragement, it was enough to shake her out of her funk and recover some self-confidence and enthusiasm for her studies. In the end she passed the exams and found an apprenticeship in the accounting and records department of the People’s Committee of Hong Thuong.

In 2005, on the occasion of my second campaign of work in Hong Thuong, when she realized that I was talking to her mother in front of their cottage, she pedalled as fast as she could in order to have time to see me. She showed me the new house that they were building out of cinder blocks with the help of a government subsidy. She had completely changed since our first meeting. No longer pale, she now had rosy cheeks and seemed full of dynamism. This success was for me perhaps the best reward for all our efforts to help the education of young women in A Luoi since 2003.



Assistant to the deputy editor-in-chief of Women of Vietnam Review, summer 1980 in Czechoslovakia.

Assistant to the deputy editor-in-chief of Women of Vietnam Review, summer 1980 in Czechoslovakia.



Conference of women editors-in-chief on gender equality within the family, Cuba 1986.

Conference of women editors-in-chief on gender equality within the family, Cuba 1986.



Participants in the Women and Science seminar visiting the Institute of Science, Hanoi 1987.

Participants in the Women and Science seminar visiting the Institute of Science, Hanoi 1987.



Gender workshop organized by UNDP and the Vietnam Women's Union, 1990.

Gender workshop organized by UNDP and the Vietnam Women's Union, 1990.

Nine: Four weeks in the United States

After 11 days (from 20th September to 2nd October 1998) in Los Angeles, where I had been reunited with my Trung Vuong secondary school friends from Hanoi before 1952, I then flew to New York as planned. During the ten days on the East Coast, I would meet with American friends according to the

schedule that my Quaker Service friend Lady Borton had laid out for me. She had been such a familiar and intimate friend, like a sister during our trips to the Mekong Delta and Red River Delta to research her book "After Sorrow" which had been published in New York in 1995. She had organized my study tour of preschool and elementary education on the East Coast.

On this autumn day the sky was bright blue and cloudless. From the window of the airplane, I could look down and see the rocky desert, high mountains with snow-covered peaks, rivers, highways and towns. Since I like geography, Lady had already given me an atlas of the United States so that I could follow our progress across the states from on high. As we flew over the Grand Canyon the air hostess alerted the passengers to look down at the steep gorges which are up to one kilometre deep.

I remembered how our group of friends had visited this place in a three-day excursion, but that we had not been able to see the depth of the gorge from the brink. It was a famous tourist destination, but I was not so interested in the rocky desert. The main attraction had been the famous casino town of Las Vegas in Nevada with its wide range of attractions to entertain the large number of tourists. The casinos are in the podiums of the hotels, which offer attractive prices to entice people to come and gamble and of course lose money. I was not enticed by the gambling which I felt could lead to losing everything; but having travelled to this place I was curious about the sensation of winning and losing at the tables. I changed six dollars for chips and tried out the one-armed bandits. The sight of coins pouring out of the machines like water when someone wins is very exciting and astonishing; but, in the end, I lost all my stake.

This was the only evening I have ever spent in a casino. Later on, in Cambodia or France I didn't set foot inside another one. The impression of the casino that stuck with me was seeing a very tall and extremely thin man wearing a hat like Laurel in the famous Laurel and Hardy films of the 1920s to 1950s; but Laurel was as far as I could remember not quite so thin. This man was like a stick on which someone has hung a jacket and a hat. Perhaps he was of the kind that are so obsessed by gambling that they forget to eat properly.

The following morning, from the window of my room, I could see the sun, like a big red balloon, rising on the horizon, a remarkable sunrise over the rocky desert. After breakfast we walked along the strip, taking photographs of the various luxury hotels all designed to recall a different nation: Paris with the Eiffel Tower, Russia with the Kremlin, New York and the Statue of Liberty and Egypt's huge Sphinx and pyramid as well as the MGM Grand Hotel and Casino with the familiar lion which appears at the beginning of all MGM's Hollywood movies. On the way back to Los Angeles we made the detour to the Hoover Dam, the largest hydro-electric barrage in the United

States. I realized that all the flashing lights that made Las Vegas so bright at night and all the entertainments in the chain of vast hotels were dependent on the electricity generated by this vast power station.

Looking down from the window of the airplane, my thoughts returned to the landscape beneath. It was the deltas of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers which I had studied 50 years previously in my courses on the United States. At that time, I had been most impressed by the development of the railway and river networks and the industrial progress of the huge American landmass. Now I could see with my own eyes the vast agricultural production. Straight lines led to each town. There was no sign of the villages with a church at the centre that are scattered across Europe.

After passing over the huge river deltas, we reached a stretch of clouds interspersed with green patches. Finally, the plane landed at Newark airport, in a town adjacent to New York. It was the end of a long journey from the western side of the Pacific to this Atlantic coast, covering more and varied landscapes than I could have imagined.

In the arrival hall, I immediately recognized Martha Hess, a close friend since we had shared a Thanksgiving meal at the home of Lady Borton in Hanoi in 1995. At this time Martha was working as an English-language editor at the Gioi publishing house where Huu Ngoc acted as an advisor. We greeted each other with real affection.

Ten: A brief view of New York

During our bus trip into New York (the largest and most populous city in the United States) and to her home there, Martha started by showing me the Empire State Building – a skyscraper of 102 stories that resembles a pencil pointing towards the sky. The famous building is considered the mid-point of the city of New York; on the 86th floor there is an observation deck where tourists can have a look down on the whole city with its many buildings. While gazing at the dominating multi-story building, I called to mind the modest picture of the writing pen of the Hanoi poet Nguyen Van Sieu which he had had constructed by the gate of the Ngoc Son temple at Hoan Kiem lake; the import of which was that the pen writes on the blue canvas of the sky (ta thanh thien).

It was dusk; but suddenly in a few seconds the city changed its aspect. All the buildings came alight with thousands upon thousands of electric lights and in the street the multicoloured electric signs brightened up the city and brought it to life. The two towers of the World Trade Centre, a powerful symbol of the economic might of the United States stood proud and majestic against the night sky. I was glad to be with my friend Martha, who was at home in New York, as the evening tended to bring on bouts of homesickness if I found myself alone at dusk in a strange place.

Michael Dolinger, a Federal Court judge for Manhattan, who was Martha's travelling companion, joined the party at her home. Being Belgians of Jewish descent, his family had had to flee the Fascists in Belgium and move to the United States. Also, Lady Borton had driven all day from her home in Ohio to join us. So, we gathered around the circular table in the dining room in a convivial atmosphere.

I noticed on the wall several children's drawings grouped around a letter to Judge Dolinger thanking him for having visited their school dressed in his judicial robes to talk his life and work as a judge. There was also a drawing by my own grandson Cu Ki who was four years old



Taking care of two grandchildren in the 1990s.

Taking care of two grandchildren in the 1990s.

and lived with me. He liked to draw and Martha had encouraged this talent by giving him a white board with felt pens. Cu Ki had thanked her with this drawing which she had brought back to New York.

I had got to know Martha at the Thanksgiving party that we had both attended at Lady Borton's home in Hanoi, on which occasion Martha had asked me whether I would like to visit the United States. I laughed and answered: "Of course I would be delighted to explore such a rich country and see how the inhabitants live, but it is perhaps just a dream...."

It was quite unexpected, but, nonetheless, three years later one of my former classmates at Trung Vuong College called Uyen, who now lived close to Los Angeles, had invited me to visit her for a period of 10 days, since we had both retired. She could look after me and arrange my schedule if I could organize the visa and pay for the return flights. Uyen lived not far from Primera Preschool – a kindergarten founded by Dr. Fitzhugh Dodson. I was very interested in his work, having read several of his books in 1994 when I had travelled to France to study early education. I decided that now would be a good opportunity to visit this school. I could not have imagined travelling to the United States purely as a tourist, so my trip gave me the opportunity to do a study-tour on preschool and elementary education in the United States, for which the Quaker service in Hanoi had provided me with the letter of introduction that enabled me to apply for a visa.

At the dinner I told my friends about how the visit to Primera school,



Helping a struggling pupil at primary school.

Helping a struggling pupil at primary school.

arranged with a simple telephone call, had been so very interesting, far beyond my expectation. I had arrived early in the morning to watch the parents arriving at the front door of Dr. Dodson's school with their children, among them Japanese and Koreans. Sadly, I was unable to meet Dr. Dodson himself as he had died at the age of 72, two years prior to my visit, but I was warmly greeted by his widow Grace Dodson, the headteacher of the school. She spent the entire morning in my company, visiting all the classes and ready to answer all my questions, including the age of their three children. She gave me a present of all the study materials so I could improve my understanding of the objectives and innovative activities of the school, including the polite atmosphere that prevailed there.

Dr. Dodson had had many years of experience in the psychotherapy of children and of adolescents. He had made innovations that could make children happy to go to school. The children should be free to learn about their surroundings by themselves and take pride in their discoveries. I also had the opportunity to see the children eating their tea outside during the break. I had joined the teachers in the canteen for lunch in order to have a chance to have a good exchange with them before I left the school. I do not speak fluent American English and it was my first time to visit a school on my own. I was astonished and very happy to have been able to spend half a day in the unforgettable company of the very kind children and their competent and friendly teachers.



Mrs. Dam Thu watches a primary school student present his science project in Pendleton (South Carolina), 1998.

Mrs. Dam Thu watches a primary school student present his science project in Pendleton (South Carolina), 1998.

The weekend spent in New York was very impressive.



At Martha Hess's in Manhattan - New York: Michael Dolinger, Dam Thu & Lady Borton.

At Martha Hess's in Manhattan - New York: Michael Dolinger, Dam Thu & Lady Borton. On the first day, Martha's parents joined us and we went for a long walk together. Mr. John Hess was quite alert for his age and spoke fluent French, while his wife Karen had white hair and seemed exhausted. John Hess's parents had been Jewish and had immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century. The knowledge of several languages was an asset to the young John and he had been hired by the New York Times, where he became a famous journalist, spending nine years in Paris.

He told me an interesting anecdote: on one occasion he had been, along with his family, at a demonstration outside the US embassy, protesting against the Vietnam war escalation policy of President Johnson. Thanks to his reporter's ID card he had been able to enter the embassy and observe the reaction of the US diplomats to the demonstration of the heaving crowd outside. Martha had been to the lycée and to Paris University in the 1960s and both understood and enjoyed French culture. When I had asked Mr. Hess at which university he had studied to be a journalist, he had pointed at his own chest and said: "No university. I am a self-educated journalist. I have learned by living."

After this we went to the Low Memorial, the former library of the well-known Columbia University. It is a large building with a neo-classical façade in the style of the Pantheon in Rome. We walked into a large courtyard and took a group photograph with Martha, her parents and Michael



Lady & Dam Thu with Martha's parents and her companion Michael in front of the old Columbia University library - New York 1998.

Lady & Dam Thu with Martha's parents and her companion Michael in front of the old Columbia University library - New York 1998. in front of the statue of Minerva on its marble base with the words *Alma Mater* inscribed thereon. Minerva is shown with a sceptre in her hand and a large book open on her lap.

Michael, who had studied at Columbia, began to tell me all about the goddess, that she is the patron of music, poetry, medicine, artisanry and commerce. While gazing at the statue I asked Michael: "Is the sceptre a symbol of the power of the spirit?" Michael answered: "It is a symbol of the status of spirit and wisdom."

The knowledge of books is passed down generation to generation and stimulates people to think. The words *Alma Mater* carved on the pedestal signify the mother protector who encourages the students to vie for success. For example, Franklin Roosevelt (1882-1945) the famous American president who had led the US people to overcome the Great Depression and defeat the Nazi Fascists in the 2nd World War, had been elected president on the 4th attempt thanks to his alma maters of Columbia and Harvard where he had been a student.

I remembered that Alfred Adler (1870-1937), the Austrian psychologist who specialized in the study of inferiority complex, had underlined the fact that humans are, in reality, a lot weaker than many animals. Man cannot swim as well as the dolphin or fly as well as the eagle, let alone run as fast as the ostrich; his is a creative spirit. Man needs always to overcome his relative weakness, such that civilization has been built by the process of evolution and created many marvels far beyond what could have been achieved by any

other species. However, it is a shame that humans can at times be overly proud of inventions based on reason alone, that demonstrate his power to achieve material well-being and comfort, without reference to the higher values of beauty and goodness. This statue of Minerva serves to remind us that science needs to be combined with art to achieve harmony between the scientific mind and the soul. Without taking into account spiritual power, the materialist civilization of the 20th century had led to scientific and technological progress which sufficed to stimulate unlimited ambition and ferocious competition, leading to mass murder without pity or humanity. I sincerely hope that all higher educational establishments could dedicate themselves to this mission of forming persons imbued with both science and art. With the harmony of this combination, we might hope to achieve a world of peace, where humanity might live in accord without being threatened by weapons of increasingly destructive potential to destroy our fragile planet.

Towards the end of the morning, Martha's parents, as well as Lady and Michael, left us, while Martha took me to visit Central Park, which is close by. Surrounded by all the reinforced concrete buildings, this vast park of 341 hectares provides an area of greenery in which those who live in apartments can relax and take the fresh air.

Central Park is one of the largest city parks in the United States, is about 4km long, crossed by 50 streets and 800m wide, divided by three avenues. The borders of the park have never been violated, with the sole exception of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Beside the entrance to the park Martha stopped by a barrow covered in buns and sausages and ordered "two hotdogs." I was curious about the hot bread with a whole sausage inside and expressed my pleasure, asking: "So a hotdog is this bun?" I explained to Martha that I had once read a book by the famous child-educator Benjamin Spock which mentioned hotdogs. I had not been able to imagine what that might be. Now I could see one with my own eyes.

Since we had not much time, we didn't go far, but found a rustic spot next to a pond where several ducks swam and other birds chirped in the bushes. The scenery was just like in Vietnam. We made our lunch with the hotdogs and already pigeons were approaching us to gather up the crumbs. It was amazing to take a quiet moment right in the middle of the liveliness of Manhattan.

I remembered how I had visited Leningrad once in 1988 by night train and we had been able to see the white nights of late June. Our guide had been a history teacher. It had been a shame that we had not been able to visit the Hermitage Museum because it was a Monday, so we made up for it by seeing the cultural sites that were in the open air. When lunchtime came at the

hotel there was a large crowd and such a long queue for the restaurant that I suggested to the guide that we have a picnic of bread, ham and pickles in some pleasant spot rather than waiting in the busy and exhausting hotel. However, our guide explained that politeness dictated that she must decline my suggestion. No picnic for the honoured guests. Here in New York things were more informal.

After walking around the park for an hour, Martha took me to visit the Museum of Natural History, next to Central Park. I had been to the equivalent museum in Paris and had found the collection of animals quite fascinating, but here I was impressed even by the grandiose façade. Since I had only two hours for my visit, I started with the dinosaur fossils, followed by the forest animals of Africa and South America. However, I was not simply interested in seeing the animals, but also in understanding the environment in which they had evolved – in particular, the African animals such as giraffes and lions. The dinosaur collection is extensive and remarkable. They have been gone from the surface of the planet for millions of years. People had worked long and hard to construct the skeletons on the basis of all the fossil finds, some of which were both unbelievable and complex.

One such example is the carnivorous Tyrannosaurus which was discovered in North America. The complete model is 12.3 meters long, 4 meters high and weighs nearly 7 tonnes. By comparison, the vegetarian dinosaurs were even larger, the largest being 37.5 meters long and 5.8 meters high. They lived on this earth for some 100 million years. I was overcome by the thought that, in comparison with nature, humans really are very small. I considered how the primary school children viewing these dinosaurs would be astonished and delighted. My own grandson, who at 7 years of age had a collection of dinosaur photos, was obsessed by the fact that the dinosaurs had been so large, but had disappeared completely.

The next day Martha, Lady and I took a train to the Port of New York to visit Ellis Island, where the Statue of Liberty raises a torch in her right hand. Since we had little time, we did not go to the island itself and restricted ourselves to the boat tour, which reminded us of the immigrant ships, which had brought so many people in search of liberty and the promised land to the United States between 1892 and 1954.

I have American friends whose ancestors came from different countries: Michael from Belgium, Martha from Serbia, Lady from Britain, Paul from Germany, Linda from Italy etc. New York is a truly multi-ethnic city with many different communities. I had hoped to visit a Black community and so we took the bus to Harlem, on which I noticed that the only people who were not Black were Martha and myself.

In my imagination, when I was very young, the name of Harlem indicated a community of people of Black race, at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. If Martha had not introduced me to the real Harlem, I could not have believed my eyes. I found that the shops were not vast, but normal sized as in Hanoi. In a bookshop I had found various things to buy, including school supplies for children such as a whiteboard and transfers. When we walked through the residential areas, I noted the recreation areas between the buildings. Each football pitch was surrounded by high fences to protect the windows of the neighbouring apartments.

I remembered how the new residential areas of Hanoi put up in the 1960s had been provided with little parks with slides and see-saws etc, but these parks had slowly been transformed into car parks for the automobiles of the adults. The children living in the flats had had no place to discharge their abundant energy. As no football pitches had been supplied the children had to play wherever they could, which led to disputes with the adults.

In the afternoon Lady drove me in her car to visit the educational establishments in Massachusetts and Connecticut for my two-day study tour. We went on a highway with many lanes and at great speed. Lady is a good driver so I could relax and enjoy the scenery along the way. The autumn in the north-eastern states is magnificent. The sky was bright blue scattered with fluffy clouds like flocks of sheep. The foliage of the distant mountains which glowed red and gold reminded me of the poem by Nguyen Du, translated by Nguyen Khac Vien, in the famous novel Kieu:

The waters, a trembling mirror, reflected the vision of an azure sky

The hillsides laid out their expansive tablecloths of gold

Nguyen Du had no doubt seen the red leaves during his embassy to China since there are no maple trees in Vietnam. He had written lines such as:
Autumn has tinted the maples with red, the colour of adieu.

At 7:30pm we arrived at the home of Sandy Johnson, director of the child psychology department at Mount Holyoke College, near Boston. The house was isolated, but next to the road. From it one could see no other lights. Sandy greeted us warmly: "I have dinner ready. After your long journey, you must be hungry." And she turned towards her husband who was standing to one side in a corner and said: "This is Mark, the mainstay and lion of my life." I saw a strong man in a check shirt, holding a huge black dog with his hands. We soon relaxed in each other's company. At the table, while holding the napkins, Sandy asked me: "Which sign of the Vietnamese zodiac is yours?" Surprised, I replied: "The pig." From a group of twelve napkin rings with zodiac carvings she chose one with a pig at one end and placed a

napkin in the hole she solemnly placed it in front of me. Had it been the bull of the western zodiac I would not have been surprised, but this was certainly strange in an American household.

Even though I had only met Sandy and Mark for the first time, I felt very at home. During dinner, Sandy explained that she felt that she already knew me, having read Lady's book "After Sorrow," which described Lady's experiences in Vietnam. In order that our conversation should not be interrupted, the telephone calls were all answered by the answering machine and we could hear the caller leaving a message. If Sandy did not think the matter urgent, she would remain seated. After the meal, Mark went to prepare a course for the next day while we talked of this and that until 11 pm.

Sandy liked her faculty and enjoyed being among young students and the preschool children who gave her the inspiration for her research into child psychology. She told me about her family of four generations of educators: her grandmother, mother, herself and her daughter.

When I returned to my bedroom, I found bookshelves stacked with books. On the table, I found a book on the subject of the profession of teacher; the author was a Doctor of Literature and long-time educator. I read the chapter headings and some of the pages of each section. I enjoyed the approachable style and rigorous analysis of the author. Sadly, it was already late and I needed to sleep and marshal my energies for the next day's programme.

In the morning Sandy suggested a walk in the woods next to her house. It was very cold. The frozen dew on the lawn was like thousands of tiny, multicoloured and glistening diamonds. This was a phenomenon that I had never seen before.

For the first time in my life, I was walking through a wood in autumn in a frosty region. The path which led to the lake was covered with dead leaves that crunched beneath our feet. The path followed a stream with clear water that babbled tirelessly. The sunlight that shone through the branches of the trees gave the stream a lively aspect. I was amazed that this scene was exactly as described in the song "Suoi mo" (Stream in my dreams) by the musician Van Cao who was active before 1945. What a wonderful dream. I wondered how it was that the autumnal stream that appeared in Van Cao's dream should be exactly the same as this one in autumnal America. Suddenly I forgot all about my two companions; my thoughts had sped to some place in the forests of Vietnam and I was inspired to sing Van Cao's song which I had known since childhood:

Suoi mo ben rung thu vang

Dong nuoc troi lung lo ngoai nang

The stream of my dream in the silent forest of autumn

Ran nonchalantly beneath the rays of the sun

Van Cao's imagination had crossed time and space in some incredible artistic way. After the Autumn Revolution, Van Cao, who had also composed the national anthem "Tien Quan Ca," had also composed three songs inspired by the three military forces (army, navy and air force) at a time when we had none of the above and only the troops of soldiers formed by guerrilla bands. Nonetheless we sang at the tops of our voices: "The army of sailors has taken to the main today, commanding the crashing waves, leaving behind them the rivers and mountains, setting out for the high seas" and in the case of the air force "Our wings soar thrillingly above the clouds, we are like planets that surmount the full moon."

Deep in my thoughts of the past, I was taken by surprise when we arrived at a lake of clear and limpid water. Sandy had chosen a flat rock upon which we could sit and contemplate the magnificent scenery that enclosed the lake. It was so quiet that it seemed as if there was only the three of us in this world. The still waters of the lake reflected like a mirror the surrounding trees covered with their leaves of gold interspersed with bright red, while the majestic pine trees retained their dark green foliage.

I told Sandy and Lady all about the songs composed by Van Cao and how they had brought him fame after the August Revolution. He had composed songs about the navy and the air force at the moment when Vietnam had escaped from slavery and these songs demonstrated his brilliant imagination. After that time, many years had passed without my hearing the song about the air force, until one time during an air battle between American and Vietnamese airplanes, a US plane had been shot down and we saw the pilot eject and deploy his parachute. This suddenly brought back to me Van Cao's air force song describing the bravery of our pilots buried deep in my subconscious.

After this wonderful morning Sandy showed me her own garden in which were displayed several statues of the Buddha. Sandy asked me to tell her about Buddhism in Vietnam. I explained to her that according to Buddhist teaching the suffering in this world derive from three evils: greed, anger and ignorance. Thus, the Buddha has taught us the Way we should follow in order to overcome these evils. I emphasized the practice of Buddhism in my own household: my grandmother visited the temple often to recite the sutras, to call upon the Buddha's compassion and to pray for the realization of her wishes. Her practice was based on dogma, while in the case of my mother she was far too busy to visit the pagoda more than once annually on the New Year Holiday. She practiced her faith at home through her love of

her neighbour: taking good care of and educating her children who had lost their father at an early age, aiding people in need and not doing harm to anyone.

Another incarnation of the Buddha is the Goddess of Mercy or Guanyin bodhisattva. I had told Sandy about the day in 1996 when I had taken Dr. Marjorie Nelson, a Quaker friend of Lady's at the University of Ohio, to visit the temple of the bodhisattva with her image of a thousand arms and a thousand eyes. This small temple known as Chua Mot Cot or one pillar temple is located in a lake filled with lotus plants in Hanoi. After having sat for a good while in front of the altar of the goddess, Marjorie had confided in me in these unforgettable terms: "People say that the goddess has so many eyes and arms to help all the people suffering in this world, when we only have two eyes and two hands; but, in fact, if we all work together efficiently and with solidarity among all peoples, we could have millions (use thousands) of eyes and hands".

After lunch, Lady and I followed Sandy to a practical class for the early education students at Mount Holyoke. The architecture of the university is 19th century and it was founded initially for female students only. Around the unpainted brick structure, the green lawns stretch out, without any ornament other than the golden leaves of the autumnal trees.

We had been led to a dark room next to a classroom where two students were doing practical work with a class of preschool children. What was curious was that we could watch everything that was going on in the classroom by means of an observation window, while the people inside could not see us. In this manner we caused no disturbance.

After the end of the class, I was able to have a look at the teaching materials. I was particularly interested in a drawing that showed the life cycle of the butterfly, in which the children could see pictures of a butterfly laying eggs, the larvae growing into caterpillars, which wound themselves in silk to become a chrysalis, from which emerged the adult butterfly. The more coloured the butterfly the more coloured the corresponding caterpillar, while the black caterpillars only produce black butterflies. This kind of drawing sharpens the scientific observation skills of the children. In a country like ours, where silk is cultivated, the children can observe this cycle of life in the silkworm, but for those children living in cities, how could they imagine this transformation without a picture or a video?

Immediately after the visit, I had to leave Sandy so that Lady could drive me to the home of Terry, her older brother, who lived in New Haven in Connecticut. I am sad that I was unable to take any photographs with Sandy; she gave me wonderful memories despite the brevity of my stay with her. Sandy was a charming and kind person, full of vivacity, love of nature and of children, thirsty for knowledge of other cultures and respectful of the

differences. While writing these lines I feel as if I am burning incense in homage to her memory and to thank her for this warm and charming encounter, since she left this world a few years ago.

Eleven: Some unforgettable memories of childhood

We arrived at Terry's home at about 9 o'clock in the evening. The moon was already high in the sky about our heads. This day was the mid-autumn festival in Vietnam.

In the moonlight I could see clearly that the house was close to the Connecticut River and the several boats by the shore. Lady had already told me about her family. Her mother was of French origin and loved French literature. Although she herself had not been a writer, her house was always full of articles on education and novels for children. Lady's father had British roots in the Society of Friends or Quakers who had fled the power of the king in 17th century England and emigrated to the "promised land".

Their leader William Penn had founded the city of Philadelphia, managed according to Quaker precepts, a city of fraternal love, peaceful and tolerant, caring for justice. Lady had two brothers. Terry was her senior by four years and had taken the lead in their childhood games. Since Lady was the youngest, she had followed her brothers everywhere and joined in their audacious boyhood games: fishing, kayak and swimming from an early age. She had been a tomboy.

In the past Terry had been the editor-in-chief of a well-respected magazine for secondary students. Since his retirement he had taken a great interest in theatre. He had become a director of Shakespeare productions. His wife Debbie was the head of a local secondary school. Debbie was in touch with Hans Stockmal, who was the head of the primary school in Chester, which their daughter attended.

Thanks to her. I was able to visit this school the following day.

Upon our arrival, Lady asked Terry:

"Do you have anything in the fridge to eat for supper? We haven't stopped for anything on the way here".

"I'm afraid that there is nothing left in the fridge," replied Terry. "Debbie has been in the hospital with appendicitis symptoms. Be patient and have a rest. We'll get you something to eat soon".

Half-an-hour later a Chinese restaurant delivered some egg fried rice, green vegetables sauteed with carrots and peas and chicken soup with grapes for dessert. I was amazed at this useful service in a quiet and isolated residential area.

During the evening, I looked at the family album, while Terry and Lady described their childhood, with memories of interesting occurrences. For example, one game they played was as journalists. Terry was about 11 and acted the role of editor-in-chief, while Jim, his junior by two years, was in charge of finance and printing. The contents were made up of stories about the neighbours. Since Lady could not read very well yet, but was good at picking up stories, she was sent out in the capacity of “journalist.” Their father understood that they were playing in an imaginative way and purchased in the toy store a printing press that they could use to develop their skills. The newspaper consisted of two pages. Their father would buy one copy of each edition and showed the children how to do accounts, use and sign cheques, fill in the stubs to record expenditure etc. I saw photographs of Lady in adolescence and realized that she had been a serious girl, mature for her age. After Terry left us to go to work, Lady told me more about their father John Borton, a committed Quaker:

“My father and my uncle Hugh talked frequently of the 2nd World War whenever this uncle came to dinner. When war had broken out between the US and Japan after Pearl Harbour, he had been assigned to the State Department”.

“At the end of the war, he had been the vice-president of the committee of the State Department responsible for the politics of post-war Japan. The President had announced that Emperor Hirohito of Japan would be tried and executed for war crimes. Hugh had understood that the people of Japan worshiped the emperor and regarded him as a living god worthy of total obedience. Thus, Hugh realized that to execute the emperor could lead sooner or later to a bitter war worse than any the US had seen before. But the President held sway over Congress.”

“Fortunately, the president had been ill on the day that the committee had voted on the destiny of the Japanese emperor and the post-war political settlement. Hugh carried the day. The cooperation of Hirohito enabled the US military occupation to be carried out so peacefully that after only three weeks in Japan General MacArthur had ceased to carry a revolver at his hip. And when, after seven years, General MacArthur returned to the United States after the occupation, the Japanese had lined the road to the airport to give homage to the man who had transformed a Japan ruined and bleeding from its war wounds into a prosperous and economically powerful country.”

“The Cold War with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe had begun in the 1950s and I grew up in the area of Washington DC. In those days, my father had been Assistant Director at the Department of Export Control at the Department of External Commerce in Washington. At dinner time, his conversations with my mother often touched on the stories of people who tried to evade the strict embargo on exports to the Soviet Union and its allies. While I feel sure that he did not intend to raise an outlaw, his stories

gave me an education in methods of embargo evasion. During the US embargo against North Vietnam starting in 1964 and throughout the 70s of the 20th century I was working for the Quaker service (AFSC) in Quang Ngai in South Vietnam and openly flouted the embargo in medicines and medical and educational materials for the North.”

“Our father had told us about his visits to Germany and Poland after the 1st World War when he had joined a voluntary Quaker aid programme to bring food aid to the Poles in remote areas during the winter. This was not an initiative of the United Nations set up after 1945; at that time, it was a work”of the nameless for the nameless”, “from heart to heart”. There had been plenty of food, but a problem with distribution. If we had been able to predict the need for iron nails for the horses’ shoes, we could have guaranteed winter-long distribution along the snow-bound roads. Without those iron nails the horses would be lost and the food would not arrive in time to save the people from famine. Fortunately, nails were provided in good supply by the ironmongers.”

“The point of this story was to emphasize the attention to detail that could make the crucial difference, as was the case with the iron nails for the horses”.

Thanks to these stories I was able to understand rather better why Lady had dedicated her life to learning Vietnamese and making the attempt to comprehend the culture of a nation, the spirit of the Vietnamese people by living in the villages alongside the farmers. In the 1980s the airplanes were frequently delayed so Lady, unperturbed, would simply open a book of Vietnamese and start reading quietly.

If Lady found a word that she did not understand, she would ask me the meaning straight away. For example, the word “xiec” which means circus in the books of Xuan Quynh. In the airplane when she read the newspaper and found the phrase “*tham nhung*” which means corruption mentioned in a speech by Premier Vo Van Kiet, Lady asked what that meant. Although she didn’t speak fluent Vietnamese, she always used to talk in Vietnamese. Before each trip she would find books in readable Vietnamese to work on.

During all these stories about Lady I have learnt many things: why Lady decided to learn Vietnamese and moreover to learn by herself while living among the people and not by attending classes. Before each visit, Lady would find some easy Vietnamese books and ask an Overseas Vietnamese to read them out loud so that she could record them and learn them by heart. With each succeeding voyage I could see the progress that she was making. Nonetheless Vietnamese is very challenging for foreigners in terms of the

tones. Lady would always ask me to correct her tones as she knew well that a simple slip could completely change the meaning as with the words *nhà thơ*, poet and *nhà thờ*, church.

Perhaps Lady was influenced to write by hand by her parents. I found that often people from Western countries don't pay attention to handwriting, but Lady had a very elegant hand. I also noted that, in daily life, she made careful record of each expense in a small notebook, a good habit in organizing one's affairs. When she was living among the farmers, she displayed the hardened skin of her palms where she had gripped the pickaxe to work in the fields. She might have come from a rich country, but Lady was very careful with her spending. Just like my mother's generation, she would use *áo dài* or scarves that she had been given for a long time, even when the colour had faded.

I remembered the occasion in the early 1990s when Lady had been invited to the village of Ban Long to celebrate Tet and to inaugurate the Lady Bridge. Ban Long had been destroyed by the American bombing during the war. Lady had offered about 500 dollars in hotel expenses that she had saved the previous year by staying in the village. The bridge reconstruction project had been repeatedly delayed as a result of insufficient funds and the diversion of allocated funds to meet the pressing need for money to celebrate Tet or other reasons.

According to Lady, her money had come from sponsors in the US who had given her sufficient to cover the cost of her travels in exchange for telling them all about it and sharing her photographs of the countryside upon her return. In this way they could share in her experiences at no risk to themselves, despite their sympathy for the villagers.

The villagers were touched by her generosity and began to raise funds more willingly; their small contributions were sufficient to complete the reconstruction of the bridge in a very short time. The labour was provided by the young men of the village who worked under the direction of bac Sau (Uncle Six), former overseer of the construction of little bridges. In this manner the energy of the people was stimulated by the generosity of Lady, enabling the completion of this Bridge of Friendship which had been so long awaited.

Her very simple way of life and way of taking part with commitment in all the agricultural labour led the villagers to regard Lady as an intimate friend and they spilled their hearts out to her, talking of the long-repressed suffering they had met with as a result of the American bombing and the spraying with Agent Orange in Vietnam.

The next morning Terry gave me a present of the 30th anniversary edition of the 2nd students magazine where he had been editor-in-chief. This book had photographs and essays on many of the important events of the preceding 30 years. It was interesting to learn about the opening of the Empire State Building and the millions of cherry trees that had been donated by the Japanese government to show their amity for the United States.

I realized that Terry had gone from playing editor as a child to becoming a Doctor of Education and then a real editor-in-chief of a magazine for students that had become known across the United States. It was a wonderful record.

Parents should observe their children and give them the wherewithal to develop their talents. This is an important part of child education. Nonetheless many parents pay no attention to the process of child imitation and consider that this activity has no meaning in the development of the personality of the child.

Thank you, John Borton, for having given this precious inheritance to your children

Twelve: Visit to the Chester School in New Haven

I arrived at the Chester School and was received by Hans Stockmal, the principal who had already been very friendly and helpful.

He took me to the 3rd and 6th (final) year classes. When he introduced me to the 3rd year class, he had immediately drawn down a huge map of the world and asked the students who could say where Vietnam is, since I had come from Vietnam. Several hands went up. The principal indicated one student and he went all round Japan and Korea without finding Vietnam. Then another student did the job. As far as I could see, the students respected one another; there was no noise when the first student failed to find the answer.

The principal suggested to me: “Perhaps you could teach them a few words of Vietnamese so that they can impress their parents when they go home.”

So, I said: “*Chào* meaning hello, but Vietnamese has many tones and each tone gives a different meaning to a given word, such that *cháo* means porridge, *chảo* means pan, *chào* means string and *chao* without a tone means fermented tofu. The children found my explanation interesting. Then we tried some dialogue. One student put up his hand:

“In your country, which country sells the most cars?”

“Japan, for example Toyota.”

The children laughed and some replied: "Same in the US."

In the 6th year class, we went straight into conversation.

"Where and when did you learn English?"

"From the age of 12 in middle school, about the age you are now". These questions were more serious. For instance, a student asked me:

"The US and Vietnam used to be at war, now you are turning to the EU. What do you think of our country?"

"Even during the war, the Vietnamese people never thought of the Americans as their enemy. All we wanted was a return to peace, that the bombing should stop and the US troops go home. Now you can see that Lady and I are close friends, almost like sisters." I pointed at Lady who was standing by the door. "I studied the geography of the US when I was 15 years old. Now I am delighted to see your country with my own eyes, the mountains covered in snow, the vast plains and the multi-lane highways."

After visiting the classrooms, I asked the director to take me to the library so that I could ask the librarian what kind of books the children liked the most. After that we went to the director's office and discussed some of the issues that most interested me. He was experienced in primary education, having taught in primary schools for 35 years. Thus Mr. Stockmal was able to share with me many useful ideas on the key questions concerning elementary education. He gave me some basic reference books for parents including "How to help children to exercise self-control" and "How to build self-discipline and self-control" etc.

I was especially interested when the principal raised a new subject mentioned in the book "Emotional Intelligence 1995" by the American psychologist Daniel Goleman, where he introduced the new concept of EQ as opposed to IQ to evaluate intelligence. Intelligence alone cannot render a child successful in apprenticeship, in relations with parents, teachers, friends or able to be happy. It is important to teach children about the emotions that they feel, those which are negative and worthy of being discarded and those which are positive and can be adapted to improve relationships that build collaboration and teamwork. I'd seen in the corridor a large poster with all the facial expressions of emotion, not just the common ones such as joy, sadness, anger, affection, but also expressions of fear, horror, pride, self-confidence, guilt, shame, friendliness etc. In total I counted 24 expressions of emotion. Above the pictures there were questions like: "How do you feel today?" and "Do you know how to alter your emotional state?"

At lunchtime, I was invited to the canteen to eat with the students. They could select food at the canteen or bring their own lunch boxes from home. Each student waited in turn with a tray to receive their food from the service staff. After finishing their meal, the children had to tip the remaining food into a separate container from the other trash. The children on break cleaned the tables and swept the floor.

Before leaving the school, I presented my thanks to the principal for the interesting and friendly visit. I presented him with a calendar for the year 1999 with a picture of the One Pillar Pagoda in Hanoi, printed on silk.

We returned to Martha's house in the evening, for one night only. Then Lady took me to Washington DC, after which it would be Ruth Cadwallader's turn to look after me for the rest of the week.

Martha had warned me: "This weekend I will be with my son in Seattle. When you return, I will not be here. So, I am giving you these two keys to the house and will show you what you need to do. Don't worry".

I said to myself: I've never had the experience of staying on my own in a strange house, especially in a large city like New York and for two days. It was really a strange feeling. But my natural self-confidence and experience reassured me. I had only to pay careful attention to avoid any problems, in particular with the two cats which she told me might escape when I opened the front door. I laughed when she told me about the cats and said: "You seem more worried about the cats than about the possibility than robbers might follow me to gain entry to the house." Martha responded: "There are two doors for security. No problem. I am certain that you will manage perfectly."

Michael who was standing beside her said nothing, but whistled the phrase: "Freedom, precious freedom" from the national anthem of France, the Marseillaise. Then Martha had drawn me a map to show me how to get from the airport to the subway and from the subway to the house, so that I wouldn't get lost. It was complicated by the fact that the streets had numbers and not names. I remembered my mother who always said to me: "If one is ignorant, life is difficult, but when one knows, it is easy. The key thing is to learn, so as to know".

Thirteen: Washington DC and its famous historic sights

We left early the following morning and I asked Lady to stop the car in front of a flower shop so that I could buy orchids to place on the tomb of her parents at the Quaker cemetery in New Jersey.

The cemeteries in the United States appeared to be very simple. No tombs and only a row of tomb stones with the name of the deceased, their birth date and date of death. This Quaker cemetery dated from the late 17th

century. After placing the flowers, I remained standing for a while in front of the tomb of John Borton, the father of Lady, who had encouraged her to go to Vietnam in the difficult years when there had still been a US embargo. In those days there was not even communication by telephone. Lady had told me that her father loved autonomy; at the age of 90 he was still able to look after himself and take care of all daily matters including gardening. When she had taken leave of him to return to Vietnam for a period of several weeks, he had said: "Don't worry. I'll be your secretary while you are away". On the final occasion Lady had come to take care of him just 10 days before his death. Despite being quite weak, he had asked her to tell him all about her trip to Vietnam.

I recall the 3rd trip Lady had made to Vietnam, when she had been given permission to stay in the village of Ban Long in the Mekong Delta for a couple of weeks. When an old lady had seen Lady harvesting the rice alongside the farmers with her white legs covered with mud, she had exclaimed: "Good God! I give thanks to your father who permitted his daughter to travel to Vietnam to live among us; but this work in the fields is too tough for you. Rest a while on the side of the paddy field and take photographs so that you can show your compatriots what our country life is like. That is all you need to do."

However, Lady was not happy with this suggestion. She told the story of an American journalist who had stopped his car on the metal road, photographed a farmer with his conical hat, a bamboo cane in his hand and looking after a flock of ducks in the paddy field; with this photo he had claimed in his report that he had been in the countryside.

Whether in the Khanh Phu commune on the banks of the river Day in the northern delta or at Ban Long in the Mekong Delta near the Rach Gam River, Lady threw herself into the work of the farmers, under the fierce tropical sun. She felt that the US government could not simply ignore Vietnam after withdrawing its troops and turn a blind eye to all the wounds the frightful war had inflicted. Lady said to us after weeding the rice paddy: "One might say that the weeds that grow in the paddy fields after the spraying of Agent Orange have roots that are so interlaced with the roots of the rice itself as to be very hard to separate. For this reason, the United States should be responsible for resolving the consequences of the Vietnam war. My role, thanks to my knowledge of the language and love for the country, which I consider a second home, is to act as a link between the Americans and the Vietnamese to build mutual affection, understanding and sympathy so that we can work together to resolve the problems left by the war".

With this determination Lady had tried to do all the functions of the agricultural life, from the planting to the harvest, up to the objective of all the hard work, which was to eat white rice for every meal.

Lady's father, who had known the aftermath of the 1st World War, was very pleased with the work Lady was doing. I still have a few letters from him, both polite and humorous; he was delighted to learn that there were elderly people in Vietnam who were engaged in planting fruit trees in the village.

In Washington, we began by visiting the most famous historic sites on foot: the Capitol with the highest dome in Washington; then the White House to take a photograph next to the National Mall.

From where we stood, our gaze was drawn across the Tidal Basin to the Jefferson Memorial built in honour of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), thinker, statesman, 3rd President of the United States and principal author of the Declaration of Independence of 1776.

At the centre of the mall, we stopped to admire the obelisk erected to commemorate George Washington (1732-1799), national hero and commander-in-chief from 1775-81 during the war of independence against the British. Independence had been achieved in 1789. He had become the 1st President of the United States (1789-97). The magnificent marble and granite needle on the left axis of the park resembles the obelisk which had been in Egypt for 3,300 years and was presented to France by an Egyptian viceroy and placed in the Place de la Concorde in Paris; but this one at 169 metres in height holds the record among all the needles in the world and can be seen from all over the city.

If one looks to the right along the axis of the park there is a body of water that stretches from the Washington monument to the Lincoln Memorial. Abraham Lincoln had been the 16th President of the United States. Since Lady had told me that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is next to the Lincoln Memorial, we decided to walk over to see them both. As it was afternoon already, we stopped by the Tidal Basin to eat some popcorn while taking in the scenery around. Along the lake are the cherry trees that had been given by the Japanese government to the American people (I had already seen a photograph of them in the book Terry had given me). Their leafy foliage was reflected in the Tidal Basin. It was only a shame that it was not the blossoming season.

The Jefferson Memorial was on the other side of the lake, a neo-classical building with a huge statue of President Jefferson inside and directly opposite the White House at the other end of the National Mall.

As we sat there, Lady suggested: "There are many squirrels in the trees. Why not throw some popcorn on the ground and see whether they will come and get it"? So, I threw a handful of corn on the ground and a squirrel jumped out of a tree and ate the corn right by my feet, without any fear. I could even touch its bushy tail.

After a good period of relaxation, we carried along our path to the Lincoln Memorial. Lincoln lived from 1809-1865. During our walk, I was deep in thought. With the sole exception of George Washington, who had been a soldier, the founding presidents of the United States had been lawyers or attorneys. The 2nd president had been John Adams, a lawyer; the 3rd Thomas Jefferson, lawyer; the 16th Abraham Lincoln, attorney.

I remembered the previous year, on the occasion of the Francophone Summit of 1997 in Hanoi, I had talked to Vu Dinh Hoe, the former Minister of Justice under Ho Chi Minh in 1946. At the age of 84 he had written the 2nd volume of his book entitled: “The Humanitarian Legislation of Ho Chi Minh”. I had asked him: “You are descended from four generations of teachers and have yourself taught successfully at Thang Long and Gia Long private schools in Hanoi. I remember how last year your former pupils, all with white hair now, visited you and talked of your eloquent lessons on the French Revolution with its slogan of Liberty-Egality-Fraternity that had captured their imaginations and inspired them to set aside their studies and join in the August Revolution and the war of resistance. So, I am wondering why you did not continue as a history teacher like Hoang Minh Giam, but became a jurist?”

Vu Dinh Hoe replied: “In order to abolish French colonialism, to gain independence, to build a new country and to promulgate a new constitution it was necessary to study the legal systems of developed countries. So, I chose to study Law. In the revolutionary government formed at the August Revolution in 1945 four of the ministers of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had qualified as lawyers”.

Thus, I understood better the precise meaning of the choice made by Vu Dinh Hoe.

We saw many tourists in front of the Lincoln Memorial which is a large construction made of white marble in the form of a Greek Doric temple. Inside is a monumental statue of Lincoln sitting on a chair, deep in thought, looking east over the Lincoln Reflecting Pool towards the Washington Monument, symbol of the Union. On the wall behind the statue are written the words:



At the Abraham Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC.

At the Abraham Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC.

**“IN THIS TEMPLE AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE FOR WHOM HE
SAVED THE UNION THE MEMORY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN IS
ENSHRINED FOREVER.”**

On the ceiling one can see paintings depicting the values defended by Lincoln: liberty, justice, fraternity. It was from this spot that Martin Luther King had delivered his famous speech: “I have a dream” on the 28th of August 1963, in front of a crowd of some 200,000 people.

Our visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was the last stage of our long day in Washington.

A wall of black marble 3.75 metres high and recording the names of 58,245 soldiers killed and 1,200 missing in Vietnam, it was built in 1982. I remembered the scattered tombs in the villages across my country, with so many unknown burials. As the sun set, casting its feeble light over the veil, shoulder and arm of the nurse lifting the body of the wounded soldier cast in black bronze, I was suddenly overcome with infinite sadness at the cruelty of war and its serious consequences. Leaving the National Mall, I sat quietly on the bank of the Potomac River waiting for Lady who had gone to get her car to drive me to the airport. I was about to fly to Atlanta where Ruth had arranged a three-day programme at Pendleton with a day in Atlanta. We truly had no desire to part, but Lady had other work to do in the following days.

As we eat a bowl of soup in the subway station before going to the airport, I realized that we had had nothing to eat apart from popcorn the entire day and had not carried a bottle of water with us. We had simply helped ourselves to water at the public water fountains in the park. It is true that we were fine with the idea of skipping lunch in order to see more of the historic sights.

Before she left, I said to Lady: "I feel glad that I could see New York in the company of a New Yorker, while here in Washington I have been guided by you who have such deep ties to the capital."

"It was the same when Martha and I visited Hanoi" replied Lady quietly, "You took us to the Temple of Literature where your ancestors have left their names. You took us along the Thanh Nien path around the West Lake where you had so many childhood memories, as well as showing us the reconstruction and widening of the Co Ngu causeway."

Fourteen: The battle against racial discrimination based on the principle of non-violence adopted by the African Americans

The evening flight to Atlanta from Washington took about two hours. There was a storm with rain beating against the window throughout the flight. It had been impossible to sleep because of the constant turbulence. However, I had lost my fear of flying on my very first airplane flight in 1953.

Thinking of Ruth Cadwallader, I recalled that she and Lady were both American Quakers invited to Vietnam by the Women's Union in late 1983, long before the two countries had established diplomatic relations. I had taken the group to the Con Son Museum, dedicated to the memory of the statesman Nguyen Trai, national hero, talented military strategist, exceptional diplomat serving Emperor Le Loi and famous poet.

Our two visitors had paid special attention to the phrase “Choose benevolence to overcome inhumanity; choose compassion to replace cruelty” in his “Proclamation on the pacification of the Ngo” written in the 15th century after the liberation of Vietnam from the yoke of Ming Dynasty control.

After seeing the museum, Ruth had said to me: “When I saw the photograph of President Ho Chi Minh carefully reading the big stele, I suddenly thought of the strategic principle of People’s War, which combines war with peace talks.” Ruth was a social activist who had been a member of the executive council of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which organization had an international reputation for its efforts to build peace and social justice in order to improve the living conditions of women.

Ruth was also very active in the Quaker Service in South-East Asia and had been based in Bangkok with her family for many years. I was really pleased to be seeing Ruth, who was now 76, again. She and her husband Bill, also more than 70, had driven 120 miles through the stormy night to collect me at Atlanta airport. Ruth suggested that I stretch out on the back seat of the car and sleep for the journey home. After the long walk during the day, I was able to fall to sleep immediately, soothed by the monotonous sound of the rain.

On arrival at their home, I was already refreshed. Ruth made me a cup of tea and served some scones. As I munched on the scones, I listened to Ruth talk about her family. Bill had worked until his retirement at Clemson University at Pendleton in South Carolina, where there was a large Black population. He had been put in charge of the international students. Their children had all grown up and left the house, leaving four empty bedrooms on the upper floor. Ruth arranged for me to sleep in the bedroom of Beth, her elder daughter.

The next day Bill took me to meet Edwin Moise, a history professor at Clemson University. He was very busy, but because of Bill he took the time to meet us in the faculty room next to his office.

During our conversation, I mentioned Benjamin Spock’s final book and Professor Moise had exclaimed: “I met Dr. Spock during the demonstration by American intellectuals in front of the White House in late 1965, shortly after the self-immolation of Norman Morrison outside the Pentagon, in protest against the escalation of the bombing campaign against North Vietnam. I was 17 years old at the time and was present with all my family. The mood was febrile. I had decided in college to specialize in history and research into the Vietnam War.”

He had visited Vietnam in 1987 to meet with historians and to collect documents for his research. On his return to the United States, he had written the book entitled: “The Tonkin Gulf Incident and the escalation of the American War in Vietnam” which had been published in 1996. The 300-page book had many references to US and Vietnamese sources. He gave me a copy of the book and invited us for lunch in the canteen.

After this cordial encounter, we visited the library and the huge and richly endowed botanical garden, where we found students at work studying the plants. Ruth explained that, while the United States has one of the most advanced agricultural sectors in the world, each university placed great emphasis of agricultural research and had been rewarded with significant results. I regretted that in our country the talk was all of industrialization and that the students were obsessed by technical, economic and juristic sectors, while few excellent students were choosing agronomy. Despite being a tropical and agricultural country, rich in natural resources, we nonetheless lack investment in the personnel to get the kind of development and scientific progress in this key sector that we need.

In the afternoon we dropped into a supermarket to buy the ingredients for making pho (chicken soup) for dinner. I would have like to have done the cooking myself, since I saw that Ruth’s hands trembled when she was working in the kitchen. Fortunately, the shop had everything one needs to prepare pho. I also made a salad of cabbage and onion, with the meat of the boiled chicken. Ruth put the two purely Vietnamese dishes on one side to wait for the neighbours who would come over in the evening.

When her African American neighbours came over, Ruth gave them the Vietnamese food and presented me as the chef. They said how much they liked the food and asked me for the recipes. Since I am weak of hearing and the neighbours talked very fast, I missed much of what was said. From the start I did not realise that Lyse had come with her daughter. When I asked the mother her age, she replied “fifty,” but I heard “15”.

Astonished, I repeated: “Fifteen?”

Everyone burst out laughing and the atmosphere relaxed. I told them that I and my children were all interested in the book “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” by the American novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, which had been translated into Vietnamese. Therein, we had read about the Quakers who had given refuge and assistance to the slaves who had escaped from the plantations to seek work in the northern states. Now Lyse was working as a nurse in the hospital, while May taught maths in high school, helping the Black students who had completed the high school course to prepare for college or university.

We talked late into the night with candour. As we separated, I said to the neighbours: "Since my arrival in the United States this was my first opportunity to meet with African Americans. I am grateful to Ruth for having arranged this opportunity."

At about midday the following day, when Bill heard the front-door bell, he went to open the door and received a visitor in the front room. I was taken aback to see a very tall Black man wearing a suit and tie who had brought me a gift from his wife Lyse and daughter May as a souvenir of our friendly get-together of the night before.

I was very taken by this unexpected gift. It was an off-white marble egg painted with a Northern Cardinal. The bird was depicted on a rock surrounded by green foliage, yellow daisies and white lilies. As I gazed at this egg in the palm of my hand I thought: the bird is poised to sing of the joy of life, the flowers are fragile, but caressed by the rays of the sun and the solid rock symbolizes immortality. The two ladies had also given me a greeting card with a list of quotations from the Buddha, Jesus Christ, Confucius, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, which all had the same sense – to emphasize the nobility of man's mission in this world: neighbourly love and acting on behalf of the whole community. I have always cherished this little present. Every time I remember this special evening, I thank Ruth for the introduction.

On the second day at Pendleton Ruth took me to the two elementary schools. At the John Brown School, as at the Chester school, the students were not arranged in ranks of desks, but at oval tables, from which they could turn to follow what was going on. There were maps, paintings and drawings on the four walls illustrating the subjects: geography, history, mathematics, literature, natural history. It was most interesting to visit the 5th year class where the teacher George Olbon was very animated. He asked the students many questions and they also seemed quite uninhibited in asking him questions.

In the afternoon we took part in a speech therapy class for those students who had speech impediments. By means of various interesting games, the instructor Rosellen worked at helping those children, mostly Black, who stammered. It would have been easier to do this in kindergarten, but these children were from poor families and had not attended kindergarten.

When any child was behind in any subject, the teacher would immediately inform the principal, who would then send in a pedagogical expert to help the child by first analysing the cause of the impediment and then taking them into the corridor to work on ameliorating the lacuna in their understanding. After catching up with the others, the student could improve in their schoolwork.

When the case was of a child with discipline issues, the solution required the involvement of several people. For example, I attended a gathering of Grade 2. A one-eyed Mexican student was acting up in class in order to get a laugh out of the other children. Both his mother and his sister had been summoned because his mother was illiterate and his sister, in the senior class, had taken responsibility for his education. Apart from the teacher there was also the pedagogical expert to help the teacher and a social worker to assist the mother to resolve her financial issues since her husband had disappeared. The meeting took an hour and by the end of it everyone present knew what had to be done to assist the student.

The meeting took place in the classroom, and I was able to see the practical experiments this boy had done to study the growth of beans in a tube. This experiment helped the students to realize that all plants require sun, water and light, without which they cannot survive. Thus, the students of Grade 2 were able to use their hands, scientific observations and personal judgment to improve themselves.

That evening Ruth showed me her family albums. Ruth had been born one of ten children to a farming family and had had a thirst for learning early on. In childhood she had loved reading and literature. Her parents had encouraged her to develop this talent. Bill's family had loved art. All the children had learnt a musical instrument and sung in the choir. When they returned home with the grandchildren, they would put on entertainments to amuse the older people. Ruth also showed me photographs of our visit to the Nguyen Trai Museum in Con Son and of our evening with the ladies of the Hai Duong Women's Union in 1983.

Ruth was overjoyed to tell me: "That evening was the best memory for Lady and me during our first visit to Vietnam. You see we were released from captivity in the hotel and were with all of you. Our interpreter Giang had sung a lovely song which inspired this youthful look."

I was astonished that she could still remember and exclaimed: "Ah! That was 'Little Rose' by Trinh Cong Son which he sang for the children in kindergarten. I remember that in those days life was very difficult. We lacked many necessities of life. The electric light was so weak that we sang to cheer ourselves up. Lady made the most of the evening to ask me many proverbs that could illustrate solidarity and mutual assistance."

Since I knew that Ruth had four children including two boys, I asked her the following question: "When your children were adolescent, how did you resolve disagreements without resorting to conflict between parents and children?"

Ruth answered me kindly by telling this story: “When our family returned to the United States after many years in Thailand, our eldest Marc was 15 years old. During that year he worked on Sundays and holidays, cutting grass and washing cars so that he could earn money to buy a bicycle for the holidays.”

“Then, when the summer holidays arrived, he asked my permission to carry out a plan that he had been working on for a long time. He and two friends would head off to explore a few states by bicycle. I was shocked at this bold idea. I thought this plan for three immature boys who were new to the country was too risky. I tried to get him to put the plan off for three years, but Marc didn’t want to let his fellows down after planning for so long and at that age they had no idea of the dangers.”

“In the end I gave in and let Marc go on the condition that he would telephone home and report in every evening along the way. He was so happy that he readily agreed to this condition. When at the end of the trip he returned home, he showed me his diary which was full of observations of a maturity that I could not have imagined in a boy of 15.”

“In my experience conflict arises when take the opposing view and stick obstinately to your ground. It is necessary to negotiate. Usually, parents underestimate the abilities of their children, while adolescents want to prove that they are old enough to make their own decisions.”

So, I asked Ruth: “What is Marc doing now?”

Ruth smiled and showed me a photograph of her, Bill, Mark and his siblings. Mark has a round face and a smile like his mother’s. She also showed me a photograph of his wife Susan surrounded by their six children (five boys and a girl) in a V formation. Ruth continued: “Susan home-schools the six children and Mark is a consultant engineer. In addition to his professional duties, he helps Susan with the musical and sporting activities of the growing family.”

After two days at Pendleton, we went to Atlanta in Georgia for the last day together. Ruth said that we would spend the night with her Quaker friend Siceloff Courteney. Her house had a garden that backed onto a wood. The wife Elizabeth was disabled and confined to a wheelchair; but her husband Siceloff was active, resourceful and friendly. Every day he would drive his wife to the park, putting her wheelchair in the trunk and pushing her around himself.

During our conversation we talked of Martin Luther King, the African American leader who had led the peaceful struggle for the civil rights of African Americans and who had been assassinated in 1968. Siceloff told us how he had given hospitality to King in this very room shortly before his death.

We had lunch in the dining room, which was also the kitchen. I noticed that the plate-glass windows of this room overlooked a large balcony, where there was a bird table with a seed-dispenser to attract the birds to eat. One of Siceloff's hobbies was to observe the different species of bird that visited the table. At one point Siceloff drew my attention to a strange bird with bright red plumage which was picking at the seeds right then. He took out a guide to birds of various colours and pointed out the one we had seen, using the Latin name.

I thought how people who love liberty do not lock animals up in cages, even when they provide them with something to eat. I rather liked the Courteney's arrangement, which allowed me to observe the birds that came to eat, but enabled them to fly off in the direction of the wood in total freedom.

In the afternoon Ruth and Bill took me to the house-museum of Margaret Mitchell, author of one very famous novel "Gone with the Wind". It was here that I learnt that Mitchell's husband John Marsh had recognized her literary talent and borrowed many books on the Civil War of 1861-65 from the library to help her. He encouraged her to write a novel when she had sprained her ankle and had to abandon her editing work and was suffering from isolation.

It took her three years to get down the draft of the novel, based on the memoirs of the civil war written by former soldiers and the facts that she had learned from newspapers, interviews etc. The novel was published in 1936 with 1037 pages and achieved a success that she could not have predicted. In the first edition one million copies were sold at a rate of 5,000 a day and the following year she won the Pulitzer Prize, only a month after the producer David O. Selznick had bought the film rights for \$50,000.

The premier was held in Atlanta in 1939 and soon became one of the most famous films ever made, winning 8 Oscars. The leading characters, Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler, were played by Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable, bringing them worldwide fame. In Vietnam we always say that behind every famous man there must be a woman who supports him, but in this case, it was Mitchell's husband who supported her when she was confined to her study and enabled an exceptional masterpiece to be created. In adversity there is opportunity.

I could never have imagined that I would one day visit Cherry St in Atlanta to view the villa where the author of "Gone with the Wind" had written the novel. The many visitors from all the continents of the world demonstrated the huge influence this novel has had. It is a tragedy that her life was ended when she was mowed down at the side of the road by a drunken taxi driver.



Ruth and Dam Thu at a farewell meal in a Vietnamese restaurant in Atlanta.

Ruth and Dam Thu at a farewell meal in a Vietnamese restaurant in Atlanta.

My last visit was to the tomb and memorial of Martin Luther King in his native town of Atlanta. The tomb is a rectangular white marble slab in the middle of a blue lake like a swimming pool. The front of the tomb has these words engraved:



At the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial in Atlanta with Ruth Cadwallader.

At the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial in Atlanta with Ruth Cadwallader.

REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING

1929-1968

Free at last, Free at last

Thank God Almighty

I'm free at last

I repeated to myself "Thank God Almighty, I am free at last."

These words are taken from his most famous speech "I Have a Dream" which he delivered on 23rd August 1963 to some 250,000 people after the peaceful demonstration on the National Mall in front of the Lincoln Memorial, the very same president who had signed the Declaration of Emancipation of the Blacks from the yoke of slavery 100 years earlier. Despite this, King pointed out in his speech that after 100 years the Blacks still lived in an island of poverty amidst the vast ocean of American material prosperity. The African-Americans were exiled in their own country, subjected to numerous injustices in employment and living conditions, the victims of segregation in restaurants, public schools, sports fields and public spaces.

In the years 1957 to the day of his death in 1968 King had faced many challenges. He had been arrested many times. He had confidently persisted in the non-violent method of protest, influenced by Gandhi (leader of the Indian flight against British colonialism), leading the peaceful movement in pursuit of civil rights for American Blacks which had secured significant

results. Various rights had been recognized by the Supreme Court in 1964 and the right of African-Americans to vote in the South had been adopted by Congress in 1965. In 1964 he became the youngest person ever to win the Nobel Peace Prize for committing himself to the fight for civil rights and freedom for Blacks and for his devotion to public service. The prize had been worth \$54,126 which he donated to the movement against racial segregation.

On the wall of the memorial is a very large picture of all the many people who had fought for liberty, peace, antiracism and against poverty by means of non-violent methods. Inside I was able to read extracts from books and quotations from speeches by King which enabled me to improve my understanding of why the speech "I Have a Dream" achieved such a global reputation with phrases such as:

"I have a dream that one day, on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood."

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character."

I was convinced by the argument King uses in his first book "The March to Liberty" of 1958 to analyse the origins of fear:

"Men often hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they cannot communicate; they cannot communicate because they are separated."

I thought of the joyful evening that I had spent in the company of Lyse and May the other day and how it had demonstrated the fraternity that does not permit of racial prejudice. However, this is a long-term project and must be worked on every day with persistence. Quakers believe that all humans on this earth hold the same Lord Creator in their hearts, without any distinction of race, language, creed or opinion. They do not go to church, but they gather every year or two to share the work they have done to service the community. They give a good example by simple acts and modesty in daily life.

The next morning Bill and Ruth took me to the airport at a very early hour for my 7am flight. When we had loaded my luggage into the trunk of their car, a policeman suddenly appeared on a motorcycle. He asked us whether we needed any assistance. Bill replied quietly: "We are going to the airport early so as not to miss the flight to New York. The bags are light so no need to bother you."

I wondered whether he had approached us to check out whether we might be hooligans in the process of robbing a house in the middle of the night. I thought it strange since at other times there was no sign of any police. In the airports, the police could appear out of nowhere to intervene if one parked in the wrong place; this time it was very early, the street was empty, but this policeman had just turned up on his motorbike.

At the airport Ruth smiled as I slipped my backpack onto one shoulder and waved with my free hand. I thanked them for my stay, full of interest and delight thanks to their well-organized and productive programme of activities. A rich harvest indeed, far beyond my expectations.

Fifteen: A friend from New York

For my return flight to New York, Lady and Ruth had booked me a ticket with a lay-over in Chicago. I would be delighted to get a glimpse of this great city. The passenger next to me was kind enough to yield his seat so that I could look out as the airplane flew over Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois in the morning sunlight. Thus, I arrived in the region of the Great Lakes. As the airplane banked to land, I was amazed by the sight of the gigantic city with its grid formation and the multi-story apartment buildings lined up along the shore of the lake, itself a limpid blue like the sea.

I had found my way to Martha's home in Manhattan without difficulty since her instructions were precise. It was true that I needed to look after the two cats. Michael had left a note on the table with a list of the food in the refrigerator and a ticket for the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I had to visit it alone, but it was certainly worth it to see one of the largest museums in the world with more than 2 million works of art covering 5,000 years of history from all parts of the world. Many of the works had been donated by collectors at the end of their lives. I only had time to visit the North and South American departments. I was more struck by a painting of two armies drawn up in preparation for battle; the two sides with their gleaming weapons were about to throw themselves at each other. War again! What a sad scene.

When I was back at the apartment, I got a telephone call from Karen Hess. She asked me if I needed any help and reminded me not to let the cats escape outside. I watched the two cats carefully, my only companions. I had never seen such large cats, almost double the size of Siamese cats. I found it strange that the cats should have their own litter area filled with little stones that looked like quicklime.

After my meal I relaxed on the sofa and recalled my first meeting with Martha Hess in Hanoi, four years before.

The first time had been at a Thanksgiving Feast organized by Lady Borton in Hanoi. The second time in 1994 I had accompanied her to the Centre for the War Wounded at Thuan Thanh, when she interviewed five people, of whom three men had damage to the spinal column and two women had lost both their arms. On this occasion she had shown them her book "Then the Americans Came" in which she had recorded these interviews. Four people had got married at the centre, one of whom a Mr. Dung could not have children, but had adopted two orphans. She had visited both families and asked me to translate the passages referring to them in the book, to make sure that she had got their story right.



Martha, back in Hanoi, visiting the family of Mme Phong, a former youth volunteer who lost both arms to an American rocket while repairing a road in Quang Binh.

Martha, back in Hanoi, visiting the family of Mme Phong, a former youth volunteer who lost both arms to an American rocket while repairing a road in Quang Binh.

At midday, the director of the centre met us and invited us to stay for lunch, but she declined. Later she whispered in my ear: "I've only got \$100 to buy the equipment for the centre to buy a ping pong table. If we eat here, how much money will be left over for that purpose?"

On the way back to Hanoi, Martha had confided in me: "I took part in the anti-war movement "Yankee Go Home" when I was in Paris with my father, the news correspondent. In 1989 I had saved up enough money to travel to Vietnam by working as a court stenographer in New York, which was quite well paid. Wherever I went I met people who had memories of the terrible war. In 1990 I had decided to spend two months in Vietnam without pay in order to find an English-speaking guide who could accompany me from one end of Vietnam to another to conduct interviews, particularly in those

places which had suffered the most appalling consequences, the coast, the mountains and Kham Thien Street in Hanoi. I found civilians from all walks of life and some veterans and wounded soldiers.

The next year I had returned to Vietnam to complete all the research necessary for the final edit. The book was 240 pages long and was entitled: "Then the Americans Came". It contained more than 100 interviews with 50 photographs including 37 photographs taken by me and 13 by war correspondents taken at the front line during the war. When we went to see Dung (he had studied hydraulics and been wounded and made prisoner at Khe Sanh) he was in bed and wracked with pain from all the shrapnel still in his skull and vertebra. Martha cried as she followed his wife who was a nurse and administered an injection of morphine. She shook her head and said: "I am so disappointed that former President Nixon was given a state funeral."

Martha had visited me from time to time and we had spoken a lot about family subjects and the education of children within the family. On one occasion Martha had given my grandson Cuki, then aged five, a gift of a white board with a set of felt pens in different colours. She said: "I have seen Cuki make very expressive drawings on paper; we must give him the means to develop his talent, or the gift will fade, which would be a sad waste."

The next morning Martha returned from Seattle. I told her all about my visit to the South. She smiled and said kindly: "You are so lucky. I have never been to Atlanta, nor the Grand Canyon, nor Las Vegas."

I was taken aback and thought: "She has been to Vietnam more than she has travelled around the US."

In the afternoon Martha took me to the oldest bookshop in the city, built in the late 19th century and most likely the largest in New York. I felt as if I were entering a city library. Martha let me choose books on child psychology. Afterwards we had our last meal together in a Chilean restaurant where the food was very spicy, with a lot of red peppers.

Back at her home, Martha gave me a gift of a book on the history and geography of Vietnam, which was written for primary school students, by herself. I found her present very interesting, with many photographs taken by herself on her journeys to Vietnam.

The next morning was Monday, a workday, so we separated in front of the house. Martha had booked a taxi to take me straight to Newark Airport. This time the sky was overcast and I felt tired. I slept during the flight to rebuild my energy before spending three more days with my Vietnamese friends in Los Angeles. It was the end of four wonderful weeks in the US, with so many fond memories.

Sixteen: Stamps returned after more than 40 years

When I had travelled to Paris in September 1994 to attend the marriage of Valerie and then do a project on the protection of mothers and children with the support of Xuan Phuong, general secretary of the support association of the Nguyen Khac Vien Centre for the study of child psychology, of which I was a member, Marion had suggested that we get together from the first week, but it had not been until mid-October that we could make it happen.

I remembered how she had come to my aid when I had started my studies at the Sorbonne in 1954. After four months in Paris during which I had lodged with my aunt, who had a flat near the entrance to the Nation metro station, my aunt had had to move from Paris to Robinson, where she no longer had room for me and anyway the commute was too long. Faced with this situation I had confided my troubles to Marion Pierrard, with whom I had formed a friendship in the very first month of my stay in France. Fortunately, she had introduced me to the Ursuline sisters who took me in at their lodging house at the Serviam Institute. The mother superior Marie Angele had liked Marion a lot and since there was still one room available, she had let me have it.

My life had taken a turn for the better as Serviam was next to the Luxembourg Metro station entrance and not far from the Sorbonne. My 45-minute commute every morning was over, as was the need to queue for lunch at the foyer of the School of Mining. I had plenty of time to walk to the Library of St. Genevieve. I was also able to practice the French language, absorb French culture and borrow books translated into French by famous authors. Life was a bed of roses, which offset the rigours of the long hours of study required by the mathematics course.

On this occasion, I met not only with Marion and her husband at their home, but also Bernadette with her husband, Arlette and Suzanne. Quite a coincidence since I had a photograph of exactly this group of friends taken at Serviam in 1955. Our reunion was jolly and uninhibited.

After lunch we went for a walk in the park of Versailles



At Versailles Park with Suzanne, Marion, Bernadette, and Arlette, 1994.

At Versailles Park with Suzanne, Marion, Bernadette, and Arlette, 1994. , taking photographs under the shade of the golden-yellow leaves of the ancient trees; the Tulip trees from America with their red foliage made the scenery unlike anything else I had seen in autumn. The photographs that we took became special following the two big storms of 1999 which had blown down many of the older trees.



At Fontainebleau Forest with Françoise Merklen, 1994.

At Fontainebleau Forest with Françoise Merklen, 1994. Before we parted Arlette had invited Louis, Marion and me to visit the Loire chateaus with her in November, which I was eager to do, having never been there. Louis volunteered to drive us in his car.

That night I stayed with Marion. In her intimate little drawing room, Marion told me the story of how we had managed to rediscover ourselves after all the years of broken contact during the war. She had been particularly concerned to read of the American B-52 bombing of Hanoi in December 1972. Then at last an opportunity had arisen when she had heard that a friend of her daughter's, who was of Vietnamese origin, was planning to pass through Hanoi after a visit to her hometown of Danang. Marion said: "I had only just enough time to give her your name and Hanoi address and ask her to visit you or find out where you were."

"Yes indeed. She didn't know your maiden name and kept mentioning your husband's name Patarin, which was new to me. I thought perhaps it might be the husband of Francoise, another Serviam contemporary. I confused one with the other."

"So, when I received your letter, with the photograph of your family and the porcelain horse I was paralyzed with anxiety at the thought that the letter and present could be for someone else. Who was this Francoise? I wrote to you straight away, but unfortunately the letter was returned because I had forgotten to put the word Hanoi on the envelope."

"It was only two months later that I understood my mistake, but the horse was with you all along, here on this side table."

We both had a good laugh, remembering this misadventure. I told Marion that since in Vietnam women kept their own names after marriage the mistake could not have occurred in my country.

The following morning as we drank our coffee at breakfast, Louis said: "For years I have been wondering what this foreign friend of Marion's could be like. She had kept all your letters locked up in a chest as if they were jewels. On one occasion she had shown me all the envelopes with the colourful stamps, so different from ours which always had simply the profile of a lady in red".

Louis exclaimed: "Well. What a discovery for a stamp collector to find all those rare stamps."

Marion replied: "Not at all. No chance of that. Marion tucked all the letters away so no one could touch them. She was so worried about you during the long years of war."

As had been decided with Arlette during our first meeting, Louis and Marion took me to Tours where Arlette lived. At their house I was surprised to hear her husband play a popular and rather nostalgic Vietnamese song from the 1950s on his clarinet. He told me that he had been an English teacher in the

seaside town of Nha Trang, but had left Vietnam in the early 60s to teach in Morocco. He would love to see Nha Trang one more time, but his health wasn't good enough to travel that far.

In the afternoon we began our tour of the Loire chateaux with Arlette. The first we visited was Chambord, the largest chateau, with vast forests that had been reserved for hunting



In front of Chambord Castle with Louis Patarin, Marion's husband, 1994.

In front of Chambord Castle with Louis Patarin, Marion's husband, 1994. , his favourite sport, by Francois 1st. Sadly we could not see the façade of the chateau as it was covered in scaffolding.

Louis told me: "We are lucky to be here in November when the summer holidays are over, otherwise there would be long queues for tickets. We would not have been able to visit 4 chateaus in a day and a half".

Close to Chambord we took lots of photographs of Chenonceau, which is characteristic of the Renaissance style. At Cheverny I was able to admire the beautiful furnishings and tapestries of the royal collection. My favourite was Villandry which, although the smallest, has a lovely kitchen-garden, well-maintained with many varieties of vegetable. I knew that my friends had been to these places many times before and so were able to select the highlights for my short visit. Fortunately, I still have all the photographs of this wonderful trip with my friends in my family album.

In 2005, at the time of the international conference for the support of the victims of Agent Orange at the French Senate in Paris, which I attended. Marion came to see me at the house of the filmmaker Leslie Wiener, where I was staying. Marion also gave me back all the envelopes of the letters I had

sent her, with the precious stamps attached and photocopies of the all the letters I had sent her and which she had kept as a mark of our friendship for over half a century. She was sad that her precarious state of health no longer permitted her to visit Vietnam.



Vietnamese stamps kept by Marion for more than forty years, photographed in 1994.

Vietnamese stamps kept by Marion for more than forty years, photographed in 1994.

How delightful it was when Marion's grandson and his girlfriend had been able to visit us for Tet 2019. We had had a lovely meal on my balcony overlooking the Saigon River while recounting all my memories of Marion. The young people had found Vietnam to be a beautiful country with very varied landscapes. They had been all the way from north to south, starting at Sapa to the north of Hanoi and the peak of Fansipan, the highest in the Hoang Lien Son range, which we call the roof of Vietnam, the inland "Halong Bay" at Ninh Binh and Hue the former capital, Hoi An the old trading port from the 17th century and Dalat, city of flowers, amidst the pine-covered hills of Lam Dong province. Our encounter renewed a friendship that transcended the generations.

Seventeen: Cultural tours in search of paternal roots

During my husband Nghi's stay in France in 1990 he had been overjoyed to be reunited with his old friend Nhon, whom he had known during their childhood in Hue, their native place. When Nghi had left Paris for Hanoi in 1956, Nhon had very kindly offered to act as the epistolary intermediary between Nghi and his father in Saigon between 1956 and 1963.

These letters had got bulkier with all the photographs following our marriage in late 1958. Then, following the death of my husband's father, we had no longer received news from Saigon.



Tran Dang Nghi's parents, sister, and brother in Saigon at the wedding of Nghi and Dam Thu in Hanoi.

Tran Dang Nghi's parents, sister, and brother in Saigon at the wedding of Nghi and Dam Thu in Hanoi.



The bride and groom surrounded by friends who had returned from France and the UK.

The bride and groom surrounded by friends who had returned from France and the UK.



The bride and groom with Dam Thu's mother and brother on their wedding day, Hanoi 1958.

The bride and groom with Dam Thu's mother and brother on their wedding day, Hanoi 1958.

On his return from Paris, Nghi had told me (and this was confirmed by Nhon) that he had not only regained Nhon's friendship, but also that of his wife, son and three daughters. Nhon had married Jeanne, a kindergarten teacher. Because she was only granted two months of maternity leave after the birth of each child, it had been Nhon, an electrical engineer in a private company, who had taken care of their daily meals. Thus, the children had become very attached to their father, while their mother, having become the

headteacher of the kindergarten, was preoccupied with all the business of the school and the parents of her charges, so that she spent less time with her own children. However, growing up in France and speaking only French meant that the children thought of themselves as predominantly French.

Nghi's visit had inspired Valerie, their eldest daughter, to explore Vietnam, the birthplace of her father. So, she decided to spend a month travelling the length of the country with her friend Marie Claude in August 1991.

Because I had just retired and was not yet required as the baby-sitter of my daughter's child while she was still on maternity leave, I was free to act as the guide for Valerie and Marie Claude as they took the train from Hanoi to Saigon via Hue and Nha Trang, where I still had some relatives.



Volunteer guide and interpreter for visits to historical and tourist sites.

Volunteer guide and interpreter for visits to historical and tourist sites.

During the trip, our three days in Hue left the deepest impression. We strolled through the ancient Buddhist temples, famous for their flower gardens and the mausolea of the Nguyen Dynasty emperors crowned with their unique pine trees. We also took an amusing boat decorated with a dragon's head to visit the pagoda of Thien Mu (the heavenly maiden) in the midst of verdant hills along the banks of the Perfume River and the

mausoleum of the emperor Minh Mang, which doesn't give an impression of opulence, but rather of a peaceful resort, a place of harmony between man and nature.

On our last evening, we went to Kim Long, the native district of Valerie's father which is not far from the Thien Mu pagoda; here one observes the originality of the decorative use of flowers and plants to ornament these garden villas, places where the literati used to gather to recite poetry while watching the setting sun scatter sparkling light over the waters of the Perfume River. But these are the memories of yesteryear, while for us it was enough to enjoy the delicacies of the local cuisine. After our visit to Hue, Valerie confided in me: "I now understand why my father goes about his daily business in such a calm and measured way."

After Valerie had returned to Paris, we received a letter from Nhon expressed in these terms: "It appears that the country smells and mountains airs of my native land have excited Valerie's interest to such an extent that, since her return to Paris, she talks of nothing else but her Vietnam travels and reproaches me for not having taken the opportunity to rediscover my beautiful country earlier, despite the destruction caused by the terrible warfare...".

The following year, following her engagement to her fellow student in political science Xavier, she spent a further three months staying with me in order to improve her knowledge of family life and to learn how to make dishes such as fried rice, nem ran and cha ca (grilled fish), which are the specialties of Hanoi. She learned the traditional rites associated with Tet, the celebrations of the villages close to the city and the feast of the firecrackers known as Dong Ky. She also took a course in flower arrangement.



Lady Borton and Valerie Guyen with Dam Thu on Lunar New Year 1994.

Lady Borton and Valerie Guyen with Dam Thu on Lunar New Year 1994.

Since she was Eurasian with pale skin, dark hair and a passport with the name Valerie Le Minh Guyen she had been able to stay with me without any problem, since Nghi was away in France for four months working on the French manuals, leaving one room in our home empty for her use.

Valerie had in the end given up her career as a jurist to become a teacher of French, which was more suited to family life and the care of children.



Valérie and her three children

Valérie and her three children

She was set to take her BA in French literature upon her return to Paris in June; then, following on her marriage in September, she would start to prepare her thesis. During her stay in Vietnam, she had worked steadily at the books she had brought with her and each week would send in the homework required by her correspondence course. When she had time off, I would take her to visit the historic sites or villages close to Hanoi, renowned for their artisanal production, such as Bat Trang, where porcelain and pottery is made, and Dong Ho, known for its Buddhist colour prints.

After this visit, the prince charming himself, Xavier, arrived to find his princess Valerie in Hanoi. Valerie had selected various tourist destinations in the north to show him and then they had set off by train for Ho Chi Minh City along the same route Valerie had travelled with me.

Before leaving Hanoi, they had invited me to their wedding in Paris in September 1994. On this occasion I was able to attend three ceremonies: the registration at the town hall of the 12th arrondissement, the moving religious service at St. Severin and the dinner dance in the evening at Meudon under the flaming foliage of the maple trees. To my surprise, after the excellent sandwiches of the cocktail which I had enjoyed, at 8pm it was announced: "Dinner time". This meant that I had little appetite for the excellent dishes of the meal.

Madam Xuan Phuong, secretary general of the support association of the Centre of the Study of Child Psychology (NT) established by Dr. Nguyen Khac Vien, of which I was a member, had also come to Paris for the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the NT and was kind enough to have arranged for me a 3-month study tour of mother and child protection in France. I had arrived in France on a ticket purchased for me by Xavier. It was during this time in France, thanks to the new connections I made with psychologists, educators, parents etc, that I was able to expand my knowledge of useful techniques of early education and had begun the job of translating some of the famous works of Western psychologists known in the rest of the world.



Weekly Saturday afternoon discussion on child care for children with psychological difficulties at the N-T Centre, 46 Tran Hung Dao, Hanoi, 1996.

Weekly Saturday afternoon discussion on child care for children with psychological difficulties at the N-T Centre, 46 Tran Hung Dao, Hanoi, 1996.



Another weekly Saturday discussion at the N-T Centre on caring for children with psychological difficulties, Hanoi, 1996.

Another weekly Saturday discussion at the N-T Centre on caring for children with psychological difficulties, Hanoi, 1996.



At the Nguyen Khac Vien Prize ceremony at the Ministry of Science and Environment in 2000. Dam Thu is standing first from the right, with the second prize.

At the Nguyen Khac Vien Prize ceremony at the Ministry of Science and Environment in 2000. Dam Thu is standing first from the right, with the second prize.

In the autumn of 2013, I had made my final trip to France to honour Jacques Maitre, my teacher and to receive a copy of the book on the revival of the valley of A Luoi, after the bombing raids and Agent Orange defoliation in the period 1961-2011, which we had been working on for so long.

Since I had never visited Brittany, Xavier and Valerie, during their vacation, invited me to join them at their holiday home near St. Malo. It was a very special opportunity for me to visit the historical and cultural sites of the region, such as Mont Saint-Michel, Lalatte Fort and to sail for the first time with Xavier and watch the rhythmic rising and falling of the tide right in front of their house.

I was very interested to observe the path taken by a woman who had done both an MA and a PhD in French literature while raising four children. She was very well-organized in family matters, hands-on and hard-working, having made her own curtains and pillow-covers...she reminded me of the women of my mother's generation. Her children were active and well-mannered. The two eldest took it in turns with their mother to do the cooking, while the other two did housekeeping and gardening. Xavier oversaw activities. Each to their own, everything in its place, there were only words of reward when tasks had been well done.

I remembered that twenty years earlier, on the day of her departure for Paris, Valerie had asked me to introduce her to an astrologer. Valerie was very pleased to learn from this person that she would be married to a rich and intelligent man and that they would be well-suited. Furthermore, that her children would be easy to raise and well educated.

24 years later, in 2016, this couple returned to Vietnam with their four children who were all doing well and of whom two were already in university. At the boarding dock on the Perfume River in Hue, it was not just a single "film-star" as I was told by the sailor of the dragon boat, but a whole family of six people, all glowing with youth. A Eurasian family harmoniously blended from two cultures, East and West.

Eighteen: What it took to produce a book on the subject of the A Luoi Valley, in the Truong Son mountain range

I was not expecting to have the opportunity to return to Paris at the age of 78. This time I was responding to the invitation by the family of Jacques Maitre, a sociology researcher at National Centre for Scientific Research (Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS)), to attend a celebration of his life's work at his research centre on 17th October 2013.

Present were many representatives of various research centres in the subjects of social and human science, former colleagues and friends of Mr. Maitre and a few younger colleagues. In this impressive, but nonetheless friendly atmosphere, there were given several speeches by former

colleagues, Odile Maitre, his wife for more than 65 years, and Francois Maitre, their son. Afterwards, we watched a film about the life of Jacques Maitre, who, while a sociological researcher, was also a fighter for peace and the right of peoples for autonomy, both in Vietnam and Algeria.

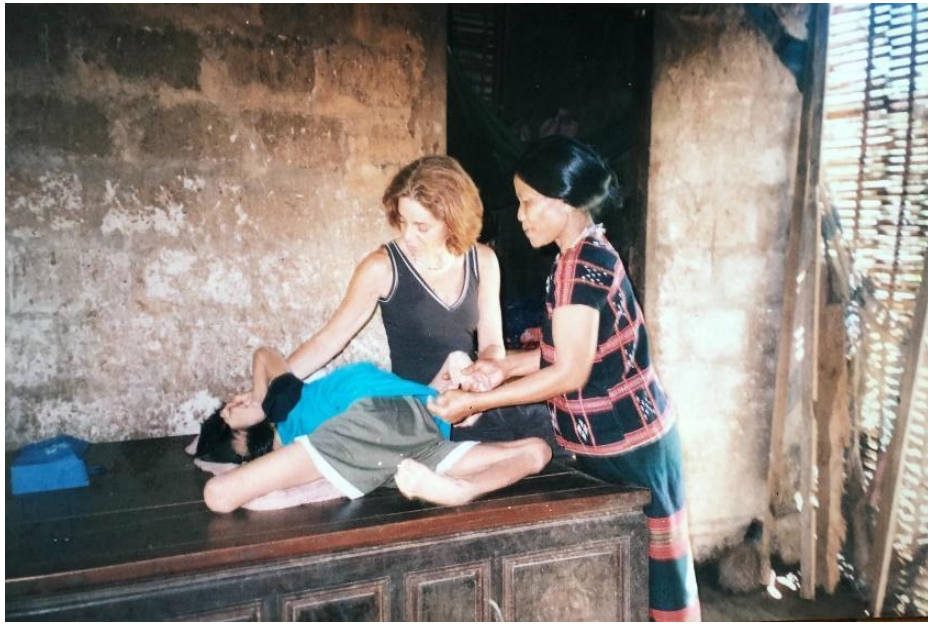
It was an honour for me to be able to take part in such a tribute ceremony. It gave me the opportunity to assess more accurately the importance of the life work of Jacques Maitre. His career had been equally exceptional, rich and diverse, none of which I had suspected when he visited A Luoi for the first time, even though I had admired his erudition (maître being also the word used to address a teacher in Vietnam).

He was a very modest man, simple in his habits, but with a great work ethic. Despite his already advanced age, he never lost his great interest in the history, culture and society of the minority tribes such as the Ta Oi, Pa Co and Co Tu who lived on the border with Laos.

What is even more remarkable is that the roads to reach these areas were barely navigable and he already more than 80 years old. Now I could fully understand why he had spread his research over so many years and had begun his research when A Luoi was still a very isolated place, partly because of the destruction caused by the war. The bamboo huts of those days have been replaced with solid houses, the villages now have electricity, telecommunications, a school, a dispensary and even a tarmac road permitting traffic to move in style under streetlamps.

Throughout his long period of research, which had stretched to ten years (2202-12) with an unusual degree of application and devotion to duty, Jacques Maitre had produced a first work entitled “Central Vietnam – recovery of the A Luoi Valley after American bombs and Agent Orange (1961-2011)”

I was very moved to have been presented with a copy of this book on this occasion. Jacques Maitre had not returned to Vietnam after 2009, but thanks to modern technology and the internet, he had been able to continue his research. We had exchanged regular messages as he checked his information, as he was very scrupulous and meticulous in his scientific method. Among the many hundreds of photographs that we had assembled at A Luoi, there were many of the daily activities of the indigenous population including the Ta Oi, Pa Co and Co Tu tribes.



Leslie Wiener, filmmaker, in A Luoi for the filming of the France 5 documentary "The War Is Not Over," calling for justice for dioxin victims in Vietnam, 2005.

Leslie Wiener, filmmaker, in A Luoi for the filming of the France 5 documentary "The War Is Not Over," calling for justice for dioxin victims in Vietnam, 2005.

In those days, the inhabitants of the valley had not had much more to eat than manioc with a little red pepper. I saw Jacques Maitre delighted and smiling – almost rejuvenated – when he took photographs of the village chieftains. I especially remember Quynh Hiem, the old leader aged 104 who had been a history book unto himself and whose stories had had great meaning for the Ta Oi people.



Jacques Maitre with the old patriarch.

Jacques Maitre with the old patriarch.

Also, I remembered Ho Ki, aged 80, who had refused to go and live in a house beside the road with his son and had remained in his bamboo house on stilts, dark with soot. In this straw hut Ho Ki remembered living close to the jungle and hearing the growls of the tigers and the hooting of the elephants during the night. His youth had been spent training elephants to bring timber back to the village. Then Ho Ki had told us how he had offered two elephants to help with the portage of weapons and materiel for the army during the war. Ho Ki spoke of elephants with great feeling, which was

easy to understand as his elephants had been his truck, except that he needed neither petrol nor a road for them. The elephants were well able to find a way through the forests by themselves.

It had been truly an honour and my good fortune to work with Jacques Maitre. He was at the same time a teacher and a big brother, who had managed to live according to the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity established by the French Revolution in 1789 and which had influenced the modern republics. His internationalism, which he had put into practice with his Vietnamese friends including the people of A Luoi, had something timeless about it. I feel sure that this impression will remain with the many who knew him, plus the hundreds of photographs and this book about A Luoi Valley. This book may have been the last he wrote, but it was researched with great dedication as if to act as his legacy after he should leave this life.

Nineteen: In the twilight of my life, I think of my friends

Thanks to the introduction effected by Jacques Maitre, former president of the Franco-Vietnam Friendship Association (Association d'Amitie franco-vietnamien (AAFV)) I got to know the artist Dominique de Miscalut, former editor of the magazine Perspectives and Marie-Helene Lavallard, former secretary general of the AAFV. Although we had only got to know each other in the early 21st century, when Vietnam had already begun to open to the outside world, our friendship became very close and deep, in particular through our collective work to assist the victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam.

This was especially the case with Marie-Helene, who had been for many years a teacher of differential psychology at the University of Paris-Descartes. We had organized a wide range of activities and events to raise the international understanding of the situation prevailing among the victims of dioxin poisoning. For this reason, I admire her greatly and accord the greatest importance to our friendship. We became like sisters, especially during the month in the autumn of 2013. during which I stayed with her at her home.

I remember that, in September 2009, a storm had hit the A Luoi district, causing the loss of crops and the collapse of many roofs. The situation had been dire. Quynh Hien, the former soldier, with his legs amputated, was the president of the Red Cross in the A Ngo commune. He sent me a letter asking for assistance, even though our group of researchers had not been back there since 2007. Thanks to the work of Marie-Helene, we were able to donate a sum equivalent to more than VND 13.5 million. When I had visited her at her hotel, the Que Huong, she had immediately given me 500 euros.



Raising funds for the VNED budget with Xuan Phuong, secretary general of VNED, at Yerres in 2003. Xuan Phuong is first from the left; Dam Thu is first from the right.

Raising funds for the VNED budget with Xuan Phuong, secretary general of VNED, at Yerres in 2003. Xuan Phuong is first from the left; Dam Thu is first from the right.

I could not have been more delighted and said: “Thank you. This is so important, because the number of people without shelter in the six communes is very large. They need money to continue animal husbandry (chickens, ducks and fish).”

Quynh Hien and the teacher Khanh Phong took photographs when they had turned the money over to the twenty-eight families who had lost everything to the floods. When looking at these photographs Marie-Helene had been overjoyed that our contributions had been put to use so quickly.



Quynh Hien, war invalid and head of the Red Cross in A Ngo commune, first from the right, with Leslie Wiener, second from the right.

Quynh Hien, war invalid and head of the Red Cross in A Ngo commune, first from the right, with Leslie Wiener, second from the right.

In 2013 the family of Jacques Maitre had sent me an invitation letter to attend the celebration of his life's work organized by the CNRS and the social science institutes of Paris and to receive a copy of the book to which I had had the honour of making a contribution.

I was at my wits end trying to think how I might manage this voyage, given the many constraints, including the difficulty of travelling across the world alone at the age of 78, not to mention the money that would need to be spent on air-tickets, lodging, visas and other necessary documents. All this caused me considerable worry, but perhaps Marie-Helene had imagined how I felt, or was it the family of Jacques Maitre?

Whoever it was, I received a second letter from the daughter of Jacques Maitre named Elizabeth saying that Marie-Helene had considered all this and had sorted everything out. I would moreover get to stay with Marie-Helene for a whole month. It was her who had made this journey possible, a

journey that meant so much to me. It was not simply that I wanted to pay tribute to Jacques Maitre, but also that I hoped to see the launch of the book on which I had worked for so long and with such commitment.

At Marie-Helene's home, I was taken aback to see how many books she had. There were books of all kinds: on East Asia, western countries, ancient and modern in all the rooms, with the sole exception of the bathroom.

When I asked her why her home resembled a library, she replied: "My grandmother and mother were in the antiquarian book business and I have inherited from them my interest in reading, which began from when I first learnt to read to this very day."

Marie-Helene was three years younger than I. We shared a love of books and got on very well together. In addition, she had arranged for me to be able to access the old books and image bank at the archives of the AAFV and of Perspectives magazine. She went with me three times a week during my stay, as she went there anyway every day.



Marie-Helene Lavallard, a dear friend late in life, united by the same love of books.

Marie-Helene Lavallard, a dear friend late in life, united by the same love of books.

It was a real piece of good fortune to be able to consult this archive. There were many documents and images, taken at exhibitions connected with Franco- Vietnamese friendship and the successive generations of people

involved in this work. According to the historian Philippe Devillers, one of the founders of the AAFV, this relationship was “very special” and had managed to survive the vicissitudes of time and historical circumstances.

In the archive I learned about many famous people, such as the journalist Madeleine Riffaud, who had known Ho Chi Minh when he had been in France in 1946 and who later, during the war with the United States, had visited both North and South Vietnam as a reporter. In 1968 Madeleine Riffaud had visited the liberated zone in the South, under the authority of the National Liberation Front (FLN). She had worn a farmer’s black *ao baba* and a helmet to interview the female General Nguyen Thi Dinh and to meet the “Long-Haired Army.”

When later, in the North, she had visited the village of Tran Dang Khoa, who at that time was only ten years old, but had already achieved fame with his book of poems entitled “From the Corner of my Yard” and others that he had started writing at the age of eight. The poet Xuan Dieu had recorded how after her return to Paris Madeleine Riffaud had written an article entitled “Tran Dang Khoa, child poet of Vietnam. A voice more powerful than the explosion of bombs.” This article had been published in the Sunday edition of L’Humanite, along with a few poems in translation: “The Song of the Sparrow,” “Rain,” “Why do you not return, Vang?”, “When Mummy is not at home”, “The Story I tell” etc.

Madeleine was charmed by these poems, which demonstrated that the Vietnamese people knew no fear in the face of the enemy and this was here expressed in the voice of a child:

“In the pond next to the school the lotus still blossoms –

On the bank, among the bamboos, the crickets still play with the pistils.”

On this occasion, I had also discovered photographs of Henri Martin, a brave sailor who had distributed pamphlets against the dirty war in Vietnam and who had been sent to gaol for many years for that crime; also, of Raymonde Dien who had tied himself to the railway tracks to prevent a train carrying weapons to Vietnam in 1950. There was a photograph for her at her trial where she had been condemned. I greatly regret not having had the opportunity to meet with any of them, Madeleine Riffaud, Henri Martin or the historian Philippe Devillers.

So, I wrote a letter to Philippe Devillers and asked Marie-Helene to pass it to him. In my letter I recalled attending his lecture during an international conference on President Ho Chi Minh in 1980.

In that speech he had said: “This morning I have got the impression that the speeches of the Vietnamese delegation were rather defensive, responding to the invasion by the Chinese army. However, following the withdrawal of the

Chinese army from the frontier, I went to Beijing and interviewed the Chinese leaders. They said that they did not intend to attack Vietnam militarily again, since that would invite international condemnation. Instead, they would use economic sanctions, perhaps a softer method and yet maybe more successful. For this reason and out of my sincere affection for Vietnam I think you should spend more time of the development of industrial production, the democratization of society and put an end to the policy of "damming the river and outlawing the market," so that Vietnam can enjoy strong development, whether economic or in the patriotic spirit of the citizens".

He spoke with all the authority of someone who had devoted his life to the study of Vietnamese issues from 1945 on. His analysis was profound and subsequent events proved him right. He died in 2016 at the age of 96. He was endowed with a great spirit of humanism and a true love of Vietnam, conceived when he had first visited the country as a reporter in the wake of General Leclerc in 1945. He had maintained his links with Vietnam all his long life.

In the same archive I found a document which had moved me greatly: an article by the "Le Petit Parisien" reporter Louis Roubaud which had been published in Humanite on 18th June 1930 with the headline "The thirteen people assassinated in Yen Bai were revolutionaries".

Underneath there was a photograph of the head of Nguyen Thai Hoc just after his decapitation by guillotine, alongside the declaration that he had made from the scaffold: "Why do you think I should have my regrets? I regret nothing." Before his execution Nguyen Thai Hoc had read a French poem: "To die for one's country, is the most beautiful fate, that most worthy of emulation."

Under the photograph was written: "Proof of the French imperialist repression after the failure of the Yen Bai rising." It was clear that such articles were at the time hard to find in the metropolitan power and even more so in colonized Vietnam. The colonial system always tried to cover things up, but these men described as "seditious" were true revolutionaries.

In addition to the photographs I had taken, I brought copies of all these documents back to Hanoi. Above all, I accorded especial regard to the work "Jade Bracelets" by the journalist Madeleine Riffaud, written in 1952 and published in 1953. It is a well-known book, one that I had wanted to read ever since it came out but had not, until now, found the opportunity.

Now the old book had soiled pages, yellowed with age. The cover, even though wrapped in plastic, was worn and the pages had clearly been handled by many readers. The title was taken from a popular Vietnamese song: "We two are like a pair of jade chopsticks on a golden platter."

I was both surprised and moved when Marie-Helene made me a present of this book, especially since it contains information about the writer Nguyen Dinh Thi, which Madeleine had carefully recorded when they met in Berlin in 1951. This encounter had taken place during the Festival of Youth and gathering of the International Federation of Students, at a time when the war was raging and the French had first made use of napalm supplied by the Americans as a weapon in the north of Vietnam. This experimental use of chemicals during wartime was a crime and prefigured the mass usage of napalm and Agent Orange, which had such harmful side-effects, by the Americans themselves in the ensuing war.

When I told Marie-Helene that I wanted to invite my three friends from the time when I had been a student lodging at the Serviam Institute between 1954 and 1955, knowing as I did that this might well be our last chance since we were all about 78 or 80 years old, Marie-Helene said with enthusiasm: "Let's do it here, which is more welcoming. Can you make your *nem ran* spring rolls like you did when we invited Anjuska Weil, president of the Swiss-Vietnam Friendship Association and her husband last week? (They had been involved in welcoming General Vo Nguyen Giap to Switzerland). They loved your spring rolls."

My friends Marion, Francoise, Bernadette and her husband were delighted to join us. While I did the cooking, Marie-Helene laid the table. Six people would eat in the living room surrounded by books. After the meal, we sat around chatting just as if we were still students. I sang one of the schoolboy ditties that our fellow students used to sing. It was about failing exams and had us in fits of laughter. It was hard to say goodbye. It would certainly be my last encounter with these friends, with whom I spoke rarely, but with whom I had an uncommon bond of mutual understanding – half a sentence was sufficient to be understood by the others. In the final analysis it is not blood, not ethnicity that binds. From the age of sixteen I had known that:

"Our life is like yonder cloud

Whether we are together or apart, beneath the same stars

No matter the distance, we continue to see each other

Bound by one ideal and one soul."

This ideal is "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," the internationalist spirit, the pursuit of social justice, the mutual respect of human beings of all ages, languages, ideas and beliefs. In thinking of this I reminded myself that friendship, however short the time spent together or the distance of separation, has something of the eternal.



Dam Thu as a mother with her son in front of the Eiffel Tower.

Dam Thu as a mother with her son in front of the Eiffel Tower.



Family reunion at Lunar New Year, 2011.

Family reunion at Lunar New Year, 2011.



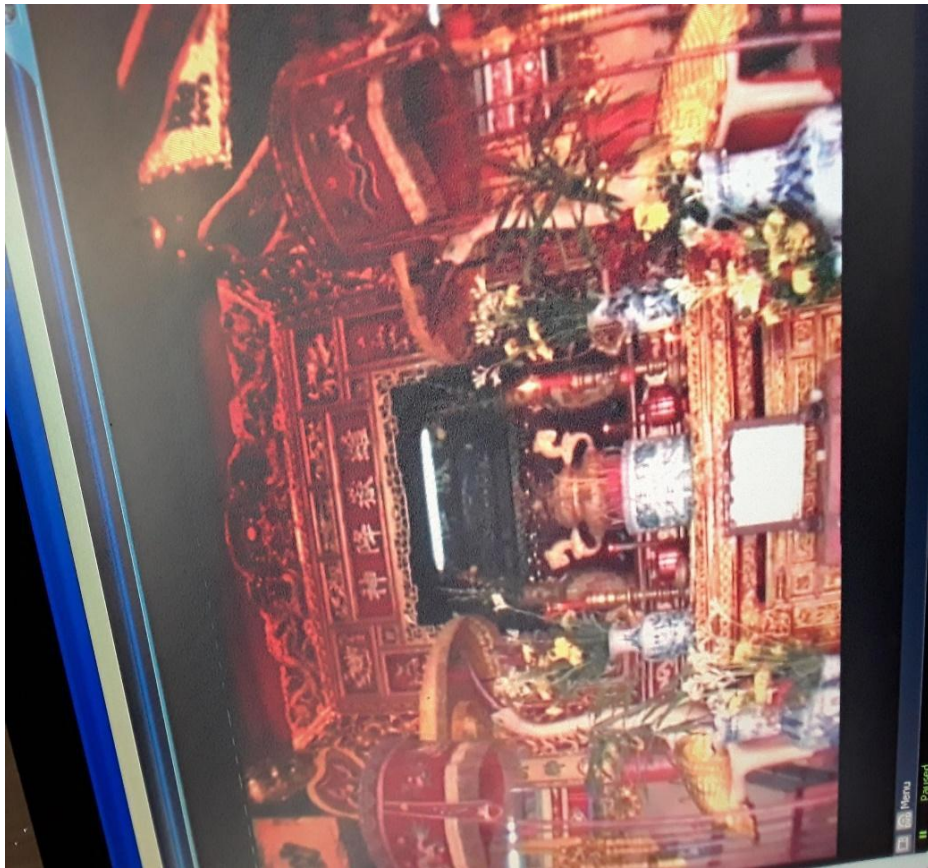
Dam Thu's daughter and granddaughter, Canada 2018.

Dam Thu's daughter and granddaughter, Canada 2018.



The fifth francophone generation comes into the world.

The fifth francophone generation comes into the world.



An ancestral altar.

An ancestral altar.



A crane and turtle sculpture.

A crane and turtle sculpture.



Translator: William Hanbury-Tenison

William Hanbury-Tenison is an international fine art agent, educated at Eton and Cambridge, who has spent much of his life living and working in East Asia. After graduation, he joined Jardine Matheson and worked for them in China and Viet Nam until 1999, when he left to set up his own art business. He has undertaken occasional translation projects; his *Learning and Relearning: The Memoirs of Jin Luxian* was published by Hong Kong University Press in 2012. He now lives in Ireland and Viet Nam. He is married with two sons.